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HEARTS

A NOVEL

BY

DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF

'JOSEPH'S COAT' A LIFE'S ATONEMENT' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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H E A R T S.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONCE in the street, Mr. Carroll began to compose himself, and in a few minutes withdrew his arm from Mark's, and walked along without assistance. Mark looked at him now and then, when he thought his glance likely to be observed, with an air of respectful commiseration.

‘I am not familiar with this part of London,’ said Mr. Carroll, in a little while, ‘and I wish to rest for a time before I return.’

‘You would like to drive to an hotel, sir?’ asked Mark. ‘Shall I call a hansom?’

Mr. Carroll signifying assent, Mark called

a hansom, and they were driven together to a highly respectable but old-fashioned hotel, where the elder commanded a private room. His nephew accompanied him, preserving a respectful silence. Mark's clever brains were swimming with ideas. How was all this going to turn out? Barring himself and Tom, the head of the family had scarcely kith or kin, and if the breach between father and son were to be lasting, it was almost certain to prove a magnificent thing for him.

‘He’s as pig-headed and obstinate as he knows how to be,’ thought Mark, as he stood near the object of his reflections with a deferential air, ‘but I think I know how to manage him.’

‘You have not yet taken luncheon, Mark?’ asked Mr. Carroll. It was his study always to be as little disturbed as possible, and though the interview with his son had greatly shaken him, he was not going to show more than he

could help. His only child had disgraced himself beyond recovery, and he had cast him off and was prepared to play the Spartan over him.

Mark, on the other hand, was disposed to think that a little mental disturbance would seem becoming in himself under the circumstances. If it were only from sympathy with his uncle, his appetite surely ought to be a little feeble.

‘I don’t care for luncheon, sir,’ said Mark.

‘Pray order for two,’ returned Mr. Carroll, and Mark obeyed him. ‘A little soup and a bird, or something of that kind, Mark,’ said the elder, as the waiter entered the room. ‘I leave it to you. Show me to a bedroom, waiter, in the first instance, and call me when luncheon is ready.’

The waiter obeyed, and returned to Mark to receive instructions. The young man having despatched him, walked up and down the room, and pausing before the mirror, smiled at his

own reflection there. As yet nothing had happened which might not be smoothed over, but yet he thought it extremely unlikely that it should be.

‘There is no such pig-headed fool in Europe as my uncle,’ said Mark, pleasantly, to himself. ‘He’s an absolute revelation of the possibilities of human egotism. The common curse of mankind is his in great revenue. I don’t think he ever had a worshipper at the Trench House shrine so far, and I fancy, I fancy that he’d like one. Infidels bow the knee at times,’ he went on with a chuckle, ‘and I can seem to worship. Tom never had the knack of it, and yet he believed in the elder donkey.’

This clever young man saw rose-coloured prospects in the near distance. To do him justice he would have tried to oust Tom years ago if it had occurred to him that there had been any reasonable chance of success and no reasonable chance of detection. He was a

young man in whom one sentiment ruled, and one only—a keen desire that Mark Carroll should be in all realisable ways prosperous and happy. Had he moved in savage circles of the lower order he would have found his life-philosophy pretty universally accepted, and as a necessity would have had to fight for it. As it was he was perfectly aware that there were people who affected to believe that such a philosophy was shameful. He knew well enough that these people had disciples so foolish as really to believe in a creed of unselfishness. He had eyes and ears; he read books and walked about in the world; he was cleverer than nineteen men out of any twenty he encountered, and he knew it; and he believed with his whole soul that Folly's most prodigious birth might be found in the Sermon on the Mount. In deference to King Hunbug, the world's one genuine potentate, he kept these sentiments to himself. Other people pretend

to think them shameful, and Mark was ready to pretend in all cases where pretence was useful.

When luncheon was ready and Mr. Carroll came down to it, Mark took care that his appetite, usually in good working order, should be deranged by the emotions of the morning, and he ate but little. It would be easy to make up for abstinence later on, and he looked at his uncle with reverential sympathy. The elder was not in a mood to eat much, and the luncheon was but ill-used between them.

‘Nephew Mark,’ said Mr. Carroll, when the almost untasted meal had been cleared away, ‘I have something of importance to say to you. I do not speak in heat of temper, but after full and complete deliberation. You know what disappointment I have suffered at your cousin’s hands, and you have seen that I could vindicate the position in which it has pleased Providence to place me. It is necessary for once to allude

to that topic. I beg that it may never again be spoken of in my presence.' Mark bowed in reverent, sympathetic silence. 'At my decease the estate and the position it carries with it naturally descend to you.' He was looking at Mark as he said this, and the young man was looking at him. It was Mark's triumph when that difficult interview was ended that not even his eyes had shown at this juncture a sign of joy. 'I do not claim,' Mr. Carroll went on, 'that your conduct should be regulated by any standard of mine, but I have it in my power to do again what I have done to-day. I am the custodian of the family honour, and I will be faithful to my trust. That is all I need say. I demand nothing more of you than the preservation of that honour—unbroken and unsoiled.'

Now, much as Mark had expected from the quarrel between Tom and his father, he had not counted on having it placed in his hands

so soon, and his uncle's speech was something of a shock to him. But, in deference to the laws promulgated by King Humbug, he felt that some sort of unavailing protest in his cousin's interest was necessary and befitting.

‘You ask me, sir,’ he began therefore, ‘to act in all things as becomes a gentleman?’ Mr. Carroll inclined his head.

‘That is all I ask of you,’ he answered.

‘You offer me a position and a fortune to which I could never have dared to aspire.’ Mr. Carroll inclined his head again. ‘If I risk the loss of your favour at the first moment of its bestowal, you may be sure that the motives which animate me are strong indeed. If I ask you to reconsider your determination——’

‘You ask an impossibility,’ returned his uncle. ‘Let me hear no more of this. Your interference in this matter will result in consequences unpleasant to us both. I am not blind to the creditable nature of your motives,

Mark ; but I cannot tolerate interference in this matter.'

Mark bowed in silence and looked as disappointed as he could. He had done what the Absurdities demanded of him, and had pretended to be ready to sacrifice his own interests for another man's benefit. As if anybody had ever really wanted to do that ! The two egotists sat in silence for a time, each filled with himself. The elder was naturally a good deal incensed at Tom, and it was evident that Tom was altogether in the wrong, and that his father was blameless in the whole affair. Mr. Carroll had always been blameless. That was one of his characteristics. In his most dispassionate survey of his own career he could not find a single peg on which to hang one thought of self-reproach. He had never been at fault in judgment, never at fault in conduct. It seemed outside the pale of possibility that he could be so. As a consequence

of this self-approval came sweet peace. It seemed a sort of added credit to him to have been tried in this way, and to have come out of the ordeal so magnificently. Sparta nor Rome had ever held a father who could have behaved better in the circumstances, and have cut off his own flesh with a more tranquil calm. The world would know it—his world—and would approve his action, as it had always done and been compelled to do by the very nature of things.

‘When you can feel yourself at liberty, Mark,’ said Mr. Carroll, after this pause, ‘I shall be glad to see you at Trench House. I do not purpose to myself to appropriate your time and attention, but it will be fitting that you should be seen there occasionally, and that by a gradual adoption of county duties you should prepare yourself for your future position.’

‘The old ass talks as if I were going to be an emperor,’ said Mark to himself. A man

with a sense of humour was likely enough to find in Mr. Carroll a continual feast.

‘I cannot attempt to disguise from you, sir,’ said Mark, respectfully, ‘that my professional occupations are of the most shadowy nature. I go the ordinary rounds, but I have nothing to do, and never have had. I find it too hard to stoop, as many of my competitors in the race do daily, to fish for intimacy with solicitors.’

Mr. Carroll approved of this sentiment highly, as Mark knew he would.

‘You will find your legal training of great value on the Bench,’ he answered; ‘otherwise you may count yourself independent of it. There is nothing ungentlemanly or unbecoming to your future place in society in the position of a barrister, but I should wish you to be independent of your profession, and shall make you such an allowance as will be worthy of my own wealth and status.’

What with his sense of humour, and his triumph at the turn his affairs had taken, Mark could have laughed aloud, but he repressed himself. He only thanked his uncle with becoming gravity and humility.

‘It shall be my study, sir,’ he said, ‘to be worthy of the confidence you repose in me.’ The elder accepted this promise and the thanks which preceded it by an inclination of the head.

‘I had not known,’ he said by-and-by, ‘but that I might spend a night in town, and my portmanteau lies at the cloak-room at the Euston Station. I shall be obliged if you will accompany me and see it into the van, properly labelled.’

‘With pleasure,’ answered Mark. ‘So I am to be a sort of upper flunkey or body-servant, am I?’ he said to himself. ‘Well, the wages are worth it, and I can’t expect to get everything for nothing.’

When the time came he accompanied the head of the house to the railway-station, and saw him comfortably disposed. Mark's manner had never been so suave and amiable and respectful. Mr. Carroll did not actually think about it, but he felt that he was being treated in a proper way, and that his nephew was a young man of sense and feeling.

‘I shall be glad to see you at Trench House in a week's time, Mark,’ said the elder, when they were about to part. ‘Can you make it convenient to be there this day week?’

‘Certainly, sir,’ answered Mark.

‘Make arrangements to stay for a week, if that be possible,’ said Mr. Carroll.

The train started, and Mark paced along the platform and into the street, smiling, with his eyes upon the ground. What a stroke of fortune!

‘How little we can guess what is going to happen!’ thought he exultingly. ‘Why should

not Providence take care of me as well as of other men? I never looked for it. I thought I was going to be a poor devil all my life, and the truth is the better by comparison. There's little danger of that dour old numskull turning round in favour of Tom. There is nothing so obstinate, so unreasonable, and so fixed in its own belief in its own wisdom as a fool; possibly because there is a lurking notion underneath that he really is a fool, or would confess that he once had been if he changed his mind. Oh my prophetic soul, mine uncle! how happy we shall be together! How I shall tickle your foibles and how you will tickle mine, to be sure! Yours being to be flattered as a monument of wisdom, and mine to walk in Poole's attire and siller hae to spare.'

He walked home to his chambers in high spirits, and surrendered himself to his day-dreams. Day-dreams were not much in Mark's line as a rule, but for once he felt that he had

a right to them. He had scarcely sat there for half-an-hour when he heard a step upon the stair, and by-and-by a knock at the door. By force of habit he reconnoitred in his usual way, but even as he did so he thought with a splendid flush of triumph that all need for that sort of discomfort would soon be over. His visitor was no other than Lording, and Mark admitted him with a sort of grieved alacrity.

‘This is a miserable business, Mark,’ said the old boy, ‘a miserable business.’

‘It is indeed,’ said Mark. With Lording, Mark’s concern had a sort of petulance and impatience in it, and his manner was most artistically differentiated from that he had worn in Mr. Carroll’s presence. ‘Tom’s a splendid fellow, one of the finest fellows in the world, and my uncle is the best man I ever knew, but they’re father and son, and they’ve one characteristic in common. There’s no shaking either of them. I’ve been talking to my uncle, but

he won't listen. Now, I'll be absolutely candid with you, Lording, because I know I can trust you. You were a friend of my father's, and you're a friend of my uncle's, and a friend of Tom's. My uncle has told me this afternoon that he means absolutely to disinherit Tom and to set me in his place. I'm as poor as a rat—my profession never brought me a farthing—and I'm naturally as willing as most men to be well-to-do, but I can't tolerate a proceeding so unnatural. For heaven's sake, don't tell my uncle that I told you this. I know he offended you shamefully this morning, but you'll forget that for Tom's sake, won't you?'

'Certainly, certainly,' said Lording. 'You're a good lad, Mark. There is no reason why your uncle shouldn't do something handsome for you. The estate'll stand it; but it's absurd to talk of disinheriting Tom. The lad has done nothing to deserve it, and it's really too absurd.'

‘Of course it is,’ said Mark, with petulant heartiness. ‘But if the breach isn’t healed somehow my uncle will do it. Tom acted very stupidly this morning.’

‘The old man was more at fault than he was,’ cried Lording, who was a staunch partisan. ‘Tom was Quixotic and no worse, and by gad!’ the old boy broke out, ‘that’s a fault on the right side in a lad’s character. I shall give your uncle a piece of my mind, Mark. I don’t care a hang about what he said to me this morning. Old friendships between reasonable people are not broken in a minute. It’s a poor, bladdery sort of liking that can be pricked into nothing by a hasty word, eh, Mark?’

‘If my uncle once makes this arrangement in my favour,’ said Mark, ‘he’ll be immovable. Anything that is to be done must be done at once.’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ said Lording again.

‘You are acting very handsomely. Mark, and your conduct ought to be worth a thousand or two to you when Tom comes to his own. Though I know very well that that doesn’t weigh with you. But money’s a useful thing, Mark, a very useful thing.’

‘So people tell me,’ said Mark, with a laugh.

‘Any immediate pressure, Mark?’ asked Lording. ‘A hundred any good to you for a month or two, or a year or two, eh?’ Mark laughed again and threw up the palms of his hands.

‘I mustn’t borrow,’ he answered genially. ‘A man who has no prospect of paying may just as well steal as borrow.’

‘You may be Lord Chancellor one of these days,’ said Lording. ‘And between friends, Mark—between friends.’

Mark allowed the old boy to pull out his cheque-book.

‘You are forewarned, Mr. Lording,’ he said, with another laugh. ‘If you insist on lending you can’t expect a man so poor as I am to say “No” to you.’

‘There you are, Mark,’ said Lording, in quite a comfortable glow of friendship. ‘I shall get down by the next train, and see your uncle in the morning, and we’ll get through this confounded business somehow. And look here, Mark—you’ve acted well in this affair. Honour is honour, and all that, I know, but human nature’s human nature too, and it isn’t every man who would do his best to throw over such a fortune.’

‘Don’t tell my uncle you know anything from me,’ said Mark. ‘I can’t afford to anger him. And don’t lose any time.’

‘No, no,’ said Lording. ‘I’ll keep dark about you, Mark, and I’ll be at him in the morning.’

‘There’s another blunder-headed old idiot,

said Mark to himself, as he watched Lording's figure down the stairs. 'Go at him in the morning by all means, whilst his wrath is nice and hot. The proud fool hasn't forgotten the peppery fool's speech of this morning. Lord, it's a world of fools, and I am the only sensible man seen this last fortnight. Come along,' said Mark, apostrophising the cheque and waving it gaily in the air. 'I shall have time to cash you before the bank closes, but not a minute more.'

The young man was as usual in low water, and had scarce seen his way to the visit to Trench House without this unexpected generous loan. A much prouder man than Mark might have accepted the loan from Lording without offence to his own pride. He was not a happy young fellow as a rule, but with a hundred pounds in his pocket, and a fortune in the near distance, he knew how to be light-hearted for an evening. He sat down that

evening to an admirable dinner, and drank a bottle of rare old Burgundy. Then he dropped in at one of the theatres, and being blessed with a good digestion, was ready for an oyster supper after the performance, and that being over he went comfortably home and slept.

Lording, full of the most benevolent intentions, called at Trench House next morning, and bustled heartily into Mr. Carroll's library, with his right hand outstretched in greeting. Mr. Carroll took it frigidly enough and waved his visitor to a seat.

‘To what am I indebted for the honour of your visit, Mr. Lording?’ he asked, icily.

‘Come, come, Carroll,’ said the other, ‘don’t let a hasty word sever a thirty years’ friendship between neighbours. I spoke hastily yesterday, and if I spoke offensively I’m very sorry for it.’

‘Pray let no more be said,’ answered the other.

‘That’s right,’ said Lording. ‘And now, look here, Carroll, what about this affair of Tom’s?’ Mr. Carroll raised his eyebrows, and looked a frozen inquiry at his guest. ‘What can an old friend do to mediate between you?’

‘You were present at our interview yesterday,’ said Mr. Carroll, loftily, ‘and you were a witness to the manner of our parting. No mediation is necessary between us. We have done with each other.’

‘Good heavens, Carroll, you can’t mean it!’ cried Lording. ‘It’s barbarous—barbarous—absolutely barbarous. What in the name of wonder has the lad done? I had the story from his cousin Mark, and there was nothing unbecoming to a gentleman in it from first to last—a bit Quixotic perhaps, a little ridiculously tender about the girl’s reputation, but hang it all, Carroll——!’

Mr. Carroll’s Arctic solemnity froze the good old fellow into silence.

‘If there is any other topic in the world,’ said this Roman father, ‘upon which you choose to speak to me, I shall be glad to listen to you.’ Curious, he thought, how meddlesome people were.

‘You mean to throw Tom over?’ asked Lordling, in anger and amazement.

‘Mr. Lordling,’ answered the Roman father, ‘I do not care to talk upon this theme.’

‘But I do,’ shouted Lordling, in his big, hearty voice. ‘And, what’s more, I have a right to talk about it. The lad’s engaged to be married to my daughter, and I’m not going to have any undeserved stigma cast on him if I can help it. Don’t stare at me as if I were a seven-legged horse or a spotted lady. Damn your airs, sir! I stand on my rights.’

‘Sir,’ said Mr. Carroll, more frozen than ever, if that were possible, ‘I can foresee no beneficial result from this interview. You are already fully informed with respect to my in-

tentions, and I must beg you to regard them as being fixed and final.'

'You mean to throw Tom over?' asked Lording again.

'I have already expressed my meaning fully and completely,' returned the other.

Lording broke out with a curse.

'You heartless blackguard! I'll post you! Mark my words, I'll post you from one end of the county to the other. And, by gad, sir! if you throw the lad over, I'll take him in hand. I've got enough for the pair of 'em, and they shall marry as soon as they like, and live down here and be an eyesore to you.'

Mr. Carroll rang the bell with no change in the iciness of his demeanour. Lording, in his rage, turned upon the man who answered the summons.

'I'll begin here,' he cried, with an apoplectic face. He seized the man by the shoulders. 'Do you see that fellow there? He's the

greatest scoundrel unhung. Do you guess what he's done? Sent off his only son into the world because he behaved like a gentleman. I'll stop the very labourers in the fields and tell 'em of it.'

'The door!' thundered the master of the house, all his icy contempt giving way to sudden anger.

'I'll go when I like and how I like,' cried Lordling, shaking his riding-whip in Carroll's face. He had never been a great stickler for dignity, and by this time he had very little left.

'The door!' cried Mr. Carroll again, tugging madly at the bell-pull until it suddenly came down in his hands. Three or four servants, male and female, ran in alarm to answer this remarkable summons, and stood huddled at the door of the room.

'You barbarous scoundrel!' shouted Lordling, who could scarcely speak for rage. 'I'll post you everywhere, and I'll fight the lad's

cause against you while I've a breath in my body. There's a villain for you!' he stammered at the amazed and frightened servants. 'Turns his only son out of house and home for nothing!'

'Remove this madman!' said Mr. Carroll, with some return to calmness. 'Do you hear?'

At this the enraged old man made at him with his riding-whip, but the butler, who was a lusty fellow with no want of courage, stepped between.

'Can't stand by and see that, sir,' he said quietly. Then the others took courage and flocked into the room. The butler led the contingent, with remonstrances and prayers to Lording, and, advancing slowly, backed him out of the house, he still raging and threatening and cursing. He was mounted and more than half way home before he recovered himself. All on a sudden he groaned and pulled up his horse smartly.

‘Well,’ he cried disconsolately, ‘I’m a pretty sort of old fool to undertake to mediate for a poor lad. The fat’s in the fire now beyond a doubt.’

It did not indeed seem likely that his interview with Tom’s father had greatly advanced Tom’s cause. The story reached Mark’s ears through the butler, who was not indisposed to be on friendly terms with the new heir, though he regretted the fate of the old one. The new heir listened to it all with a serious and even an aggrieved expression.

‘Poor old fellow!’ he said. ‘He loved Tom dearly. He meant well, Johnson, but it was not the right way to take.’

He went away sorrowful to look at, but when he reached the solitude of his own room he laughed until his sides ached and the tears were in his eyes.

‘A world of fools!’ said Mark. ‘A world of fools!’

CHAPTER XIV.

It was plain to Mary Lording that her father was disturbed; but he would confess nothing as yet, in spite of all her coaxing. Something within herself held her back from the plain question she wished to ask, and she avoided the mention of Tom's name. Baretti was far away, and she never heard of him except through her affianced lover's letters. What with novels and plays, one gets a little tired of this eternal theme of love, and the powers of the passion are so much insisted on that one grows into a sort of tacit unbelief in them. Yet the stories of its prowess are true after all, and it makes a full half of the real joys of the world and a full half of the world's real sorrow. It

was not agreeable to the girl to confess to herself that the scattered mentions of Barette in Tom Carroll's letters made them welcome to her, and that she read and re-read the letters for the sake of them. She meant to be honest all along, and she did battle with her own interest in the painter, and despised and hated herself twenty times a day because the interest mastered her. But she was going to marry Tom Carroll, and to be a true and loyal wife to him. To a purely-bred girl, loyalty meant loyalty in thought simply, because active disloyalty, if her own mind had hinted at it—as it never could, untempted—would have looked most monstrously impossible.

She was not so happy as she once had been, but she looked for happiness after her marriage, and was disposed to dive into matrimony headlong, because it seemed as if it were the only state in which she could forget her unfortunate interest in Barette.

‘I have had a stupid quarrel with a stupid friend of mine, my dear,’ said her father at last, in answer to her coaxing; ‘and I am stupid enough to be annoyed by it. That’s all, my darling. Run away and leave a disagreeable old man to himself.’ She kissed him obediently and went away, and he noticed, not for the first time, that she was scarcely as sprightly as she had used to be. ‘Leaving girlhood behind her, and growing into a woman, poor thing!’ said the father, glancing after her. ‘All young things frisk about jollily, and all old ones grow slow and sadden down a bit.’

That was a very unusual sort of reflection for Lording; but recent circumstances had somewhat depressed him. His daughter passed from his thoughts after a little time, and he concentrated himself on Tom and that unfortunate youngster’s affairs. It was clear enough now that the elder Carroll had meant what he

had said to Tom in London, but it was on Lording's conscience that he himself might have been partially responsible for the father's bitter conclusion.

‘If I had left him alone,’ he thought at times, ‘he might have repented.’ But then he would break out with new anathema against his neighbour. ‘Not he! The bowelless scoundrel! The pompous, stuck-up, heartless prig!’

Lording had many misgivings about Tom's acceptance of the offer he meant to make him. The youngster was proud, and it was a hundred to one that he would be too high-minded to live as a dependent on the bounty of his father-in-law; and yet the old fellow determined to try him. For one thing (apart from his love for his daughter, and his friendship for Tom, and his resolve to make them happy if he could), this plan was the only one he could think of which really bade fair to carry bitterness to the elder Carroll's soul.

‘It’s of no use to try to do a thing like this by letter,’ he said to himself. ‘I must go up to town and see the lad.’

He despatched a telegram asking if Tom could meet him at a certain hour on the morrow, and, receiving an affirmative answer, he sought his daughter and told her that business called him back to London for a day.

‘Take me with you, papa,’ said Mary. ‘It is dull to be left behind in this way.’

‘I needn’t start until to-morrow,’ responded Lording, though he itched to go at once; ‘and you can send over for one or two of the Harold girls. They’ll keep you company.’

‘You are worrying about something,’ she said, ‘and I want to be with you.’

‘My darling,’ her father answered, ‘you will be more dull and unhappy in a London hotel than you would be at home, and I can’t take you about with me. I’m not in any sort of trouble or distress. I am only angry with

a man I used to think well of, and he has turned out to have a bad heart, my dear. And now I won't tell you any more about it until it's all smoothed out again, as well as it ever can be.'

It was almost the first time in his life that he had denied her anything, and it was easily to be seen that he was resolved, and was not to be shaken. She elected to remain alone whilst he went to London, and she stayed behind in some anxiety. Tom was in waiting when Lording drove up to Number Twenty Montague Gardens.

'Have you heard from your father, Tom?' asked Lording, after a hasty greeting.

'I had a letter this morning,' said Tom, 'and I am glad you are here.' The youngster was much disturbed, and spoke with a faltering voice, which not all his resolution could keep steady. 'My father tells me,' he went on, 'that he has given instructions for the making

of a new will, which shall set my cousin Mark in my place. If I thought I had done anything to deserve this——’

Lording got up and shook hands with him. ‘Nothing in the world, lad,’ he answered heartily. ‘Nothing in the world.’

‘I can’t think I have,’ said the youngster, sadly. ‘But there it is, sir; and I know my father well. It is no more likely that he will change than it is that I should ask him to do so. And, of course, that’s impossible.’

‘Quite, quite, quite,’ cried Lording. ‘But now, Tom, how about Mary? We’re not going to have any ridiculous, nonsensical scruples at her expense, are we?’

‘I don’t understand you, sir,’ answered Tom.

‘Well, now, look here,’ said the old boy, taking Tom’s hand anew and speaking with bluff sincerity of voice and manner. ‘Mary’s a downright good, honest girl, though I say so.

I know her well enough to be sure of one thing, and that is, that she'd never say "Yes" to a man she didn't care for. Now, your father can do what he likes with his money, but he can't do what he likes with my little girl. She's got enough for both, Tom; and I wouldn't have any little fancy of hers baulked in this way, let alone a thing like this. Now, you will get married at once, like a sensible lad, won't you? And we'll just contrive to rub along without the Trench House estate as well as we can; eh, Tom?'

'You are very good, sir,' said Tom, looking away from Lording to hide his eyes, which were moist at the other's generosity and friendship. 'But——'

'But me no buts,' cried Lording. 'Act like a sensible, generous lad, who sets money at its true value.'

'No, sir,' said Tom, firmly and miserably. 'I can't be a pauper even on *your* bounty.'

It's very good. It's like you. But I can't do it.'

'Now, come,' said Lording, in pretended anger. 'You're not going to throw my girl over, are you?'

'If Mary will wait for me a little time,' Tom answered, 'I will try to do something to make a place in the world which will be worth her taking. But it's unfair to ask it, and she must take back her freedom.'

'I thought better of you, Tom,' said the elder, 'than to throw your sweetheart over like that.'

'Don't make it too hard for me, sir,' Tom besought him. It was hard to lose his love, but it seemed as hard to say how hard it was. His own delicacy and the very fervour of his passion held him from proclaiming it. 'The best thing Miss Lording can do, sir, will be to forget me. I hope she will be able to do it easily.'

His loyal heart did strive after that bitter hope, though vainly.

‘Now, do you mean to tell me,’ said Lord-ing, drawing his most pointed arrow to the head and letting it fly, ‘do you mean to tell me that if Mary had lost her last penny you’d have thrown her over? What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, Tom! and you’ll have to come to reason. Why, man alive, if you like to work, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t become a distinguished man and have us all proud of you!’

‘Well, sir,’ answered Tom, with an unsuccessful smile, ‘let me try. If I can bring anything I shall be contented.’

‘Very well,’ cried the other, thinking he saw his bent, ‘fame’s as good as money, and a great deal better. Work, lad, work! You’ve got it in you—fetch it out. Take a year, and stick to it. I’ll lay my head to a brass farthing you make a mark in that time. Come, that’s a bargain.’

‘I have thought it all over, sir,’ said Tom, ‘and I know how I ought to act. To begin with, I can’t have any pretensions to a claim upon Miss Lording. I can’t ask her to wait for me or to expect anything from me. I must give her back her freedom, and it must be complete and uncontrolled, and not in any way a pretence. But if, in spite of that, I should be able in a year or two to come back and say to you, “I am getting on a little in the world, and am in the way to earn a little money and to make something of a name,” I might take my chance again with her like any other man. I’m not heart-broken, sir, and I’m not going to be. If she cares for me as I do for her, she’ll wait for me, and we shall be married in the end ; because no man’s scruples could justify him in spoiling a woman’s life. If she doesn’t, she will have her liberty, and will recognise the change in my position, and will learn to care for somebody else.’

‘Have you got the right to put a woman in that position, Tom?’ asked Lording—‘To make her claim you?’

‘If I ever feel that I have done anything, I can make my appeal to you,’ Tom answered. ‘I’ve told you everything, sir. I’ve told you of some poor hopes of mine which ten to one will come to nothing, but they must influence nobody except myself. I’m obliged to hold them, for I don’t think I could do without them.’ Throughout this interview the younger man’s voice had been kept, with evident difficulty, at a dead level of monotony; but there it broke so eloquently that Lording’s eyes tingled with tears. He winked both eyes together and blew his nose with violence.

‘Answer me one question, Tom,’ he said, a second or two later. ‘This isn’t a time for choosing phrases and that sort of thing, and so I’ll put it plain and straight. Do you love my daughter?’ Now that is not an easy thing for

some sorts of men to talk about, and Tom Carroll was peculiarly sensitive. But he answered, though with difficulty :—

‘I don’t think that any man ever loved a woman more dearly.’

‘Very well. Do you think—— One more question—Do you think that she loves you?’ That was a matter still harder to talk about; but he answered again :—

‘I believe so.’

‘Then I’ll have no melodramatic nonsense imported into *my* domestic affairs,’ cried Lord-
ing; ‘and the match will go on just the same as ever.’

‘Does Miss Lording know the news?’ Tom asked. He had not dared to put the question until now.

‘No,’ said the old boy. ‘I kept it from her until the tangle should be straightened.’ If Lording had come as her emissary, there would have been a temptation in it, though

even then Tom was resolved that there was nothing for it but to give her back her freedom whilst he dared the world.

‘Let me write to her,’ he said. ‘It is the only way. I will give her back her freedom——’

‘And if she refuses it?’ asked Lording.

‘I will beg her to wait a year. Oh!’ he cried out suddenly, ‘don’t you see how hard it is for me to do my duty?’

‘Tom,’ said the senior, ‘you’re a good deal of a Quixote and a bit of an ass, and altogether a right-down good fellow. I shall stick to you, and my little girl will stick to you, and this affair will stir you up and make you work, and we shall all be happy and comfortable together. And when I’m gone you’ll be well enough off for any reasonable creature. But confound the money! I *did* think you had a soul above that sort of thing, and I’m a bit disappointed in you. Why, in the name of all

that's reasonable, couldn't you get married and go on working? There, there. Never mind. You're a fine-natured, honourable lad, Tom—a bit of an ass, but a fine lad, and I'm as pleased with you as if you were a prince and had a million. I'm not a fool,' cried the old boy, 'except in places, and I don't pretend to think meanly about money; but I think more of my little girl than I do of all the money in the world. You're the man she chose, and I suppose she wants you, or she wouldn't have said "Yes" to you; and by gad, sir, what my little girl wants she has as a general thing, and that you'll find out when you're married.'

But it was hard work to swim against the tide. Tom was not to be moved just then by any sally of mirth, real or pretended, and Lordling's jollity for once had hardly the look of the real thing, or the tone of it.

'I must write to her,' said Tom. 'You will take my letter?' There was a comfortless

feel about the thought of its delivery by the post.

‘Certainly,’ said Lording. ‘But before you write it, think of what you owe to Mary as well as of what you owe to yourself. Don’t let any overgrown sense of honour make you cruel or selfish, Tom.’

That was rather an out-of-the-way bit of analysis for Lording, but he was not the first man in whom heart has stood in stead of brains. Tom wrote his letter, and the old fellow went away the while and spent a weary hour or two in wandering about the streets. His mission had failed in its main purpose, though it had not been totally unproductive of result. The youngster, as he wrote, was not hopeless. He was himself of so loyal and honest a nature that it came natural to believe that after all that had happened Mary would hold to him and be true. He had never been worthy of her, and never could be; but he would do

something in a year—the opera was near its completion—to achieve fame and to look less unworthy than he had always seemed. His letter was not a long one, but it took a long time to write, and when Lording came back again it was but just finished. Half a quire of blotted and crumpled sheets lay in the waste-paper basket at his side, and the lover emptied them into the fire almost as his sweetheart's father entered.

‘And now, Tom,’ said Lording, when he had taken the letter and put it away in his pocket-book, ‘how about immediate resources? What are you going to do? You *must* let me help you there.’

‘I don't need it,’ said Tom. ‘The money my mother left me brings in nearly two hundred and fifty a year. I can live on that, and I will, until I can manage to do something to increase it.’

‘Very well,’ said Lording. ‘It's little

enough, but you can do with it, no doubt. And what are your plans?’

‘Well,’ said Tom, blushing fierily, ‘there’s an opera nearly finished, and I do really believe there’s something in it, and that it can be placed. Hoffmann has looked at it, and thinks very well of it.’

He got out the score and began to turn it over on the table, and Lording looked at it reverentially. Whatever pertained to creative art was wonderful to Lording, and Tom, encouraged by his simple admiration, went to the piano and played the opening chorus. When Tom Carroll played anything that moved him, his face would grow pale and its expression on a sudden curiously mobile and changeful, his breathing would become a little hard, and there were a score of other signs of artistic emotion under artistic control about him. It was rather the observation of these signs and the abandonment and vigour with

which the composer played than the music itself which touched the hearer, but he thought he had never heard anything so splendid, and he said so.

‘What an idiot the lad’s father is, to be sure!’ he said to himself, as he sat and watched rather than listened. ‘All his own stuff, begad; and what splendid stuff it is too!’ He could but think how proud he would have been had Fate given him such a son, and he sat and admired him until he felt all fatherly. And Tom played himself into enthusiasm too, for it is so easy to believe in one’s own work in the days of youth and hope and self-conceit. A middle-aged man who is greatly enamoured of his own work is perhaps not likely to be good for much, but a lad who is not at times in love with the product of his own brains is certain to be good for nothing. Tom played the finale of the first act, and heard in it a hundred things the listener could not know—the soaring

soprano and the high warbling tenor, and the wail of fiddles, and the long-drawn, snoring groan of the 'cellos, and the bird-like notes of the flutes—and the white, sinewy hands grasped the keys with greater and greater exigence of power, until the chamber rang with the rich thunder, and Tom, as he struck the final chord, turned on Lording with such a face of triumph and passion that the old fellow leapt to his feet, clapped his hands, and shouted 'Bravo!' with all his heart.

If a lad like that couldn't get on, what was the good of the world at all?

This interlude did the composer a prodigious deal of good also, insomuch that he began to feel almost grateful to his father for having been unjustly angry with him, and having thrown him to struggle with the world. He would make even that hard and cruel father proud of him and glad to recall his false estimate of him. When he and Lording had

parted, he went back to his work, and played the opera through from start to finish as a whet to the artistic appetite. And what a performance he enjoyed, to be sure! Airy tongues syllabled the libretto, and the orchestra of fancy was perfect at a single rehearsal. An hour after midnight he went to bed too tired to sleep, and fancy made him a free gift of all he had lost, and multiplied it tenfold with fame and domestic bliss.

But, before she went to bed, Mary's father had carried his letter to her, and had told her all the story. She was awakened already to the fact that there was in the world a stronger love than she had thought strong enough to marry on, but if ever it could have been possible to find a time when she would have been willing to leave her lover, it would certainly not be when he was in trouble and distress, and had most need of all that was left to him. The lovers had been close enough together by this

time for the girl to learn that the young man loved her with all his heart, and that she was more than anything and everything else in the world to him. She was not the less pledged to Tom because he was in trouble. Rather, if anything, she was the more bound to him. To that effect she wrote, expressing herself all the more warmly because she found it necessary to contradict the longings which went out after freedom. Her letter made Tom perfectly happy, and kept him at work until the opera was finished, and inspired him so that his music caught a touch of love's brightness.

A few days later Mark took up what turned out to be a permanent residence at Trench House. The Lordings and he saw but little of each other, for Mr. Carroll was so mightily incensed that he never forgave his neighbour to the day of his death, and resigned his Commission of the Peace rather than meet him. But now and again they met, and Mary, who had

at first been inclined to dislike Mark because he had profited by Tom's misfortune, learned to think better of him. The end of the hunting season was approaching, and Mary and her father rode to the meet and there encountered Mark. Lording shook hands with him cordially, though the girl greeted him with the chilliest little bow in the world. But the new heir to the Trench House estate had good reasons for standing well with his neighbours, and, not being easily abashed, he refrained from following the hounds that day, and attached himself to Miss Lording, in spite of the broad hints her manner gave him to be gone.

‘May I speak a word to you, Miss Lording?’ said Mark, as they rode homeward together, and Lording jogged on behind in company with a fellow magistrate encountered on the road. Her manner gave him no encouragement, but he took her cold silence for consent, and spoke his word. ‘In your own mind, Miss Lording,’

he began, 'you are doing me a very serious wrong.'

'Indeed?' she answered curtly.

'You are, indeed,' said Mark. 'You do me the wrong to believe that I took the place I hold with the intent to keep it permanently. You think me scoundrel enough to accept this position at my cousin's expense.' She looked at him strangely—incredulously Mark thought. 'You will see by-and-by that I am here as my cousin's friend,' he went on, 'and that I only serve the place of what in Parliament is called a warming-pan. You distrust me ; you do me the injustice to believe that I would accept the position that my uncle offers me ; and as a consequence you dislike me. I don't like to be disliked by the Queen of the County, and I don't like to be misjudged. It's a very agreeable little holiday for a poor man like me, if it weren't for Tom's discomfort in the meantime, but he knows from me that I am doing all I

can to straighten matters, and that I shall resign in his favour as soon as I have brought my uncle round.'

There was an air of jolly candour about Mark as he said all this which made the girl condone even the phrase about the Queen of the County, which (as may be admitted) was not in the very best taste. No young man can be perfect all round, and Mark's courtships, numerous as they were, had one and all been directed at ladies who liked their compliments unwatered—neat, as they say of spirits. The girl more than half believed him, and, since he could do so much for Tom if he were so minded, it was scarcely wise, in Tom's behalf, to be at daggers drawn with him.

'Confess it,' said Mark. 'You thought so ill of me?'

'I believed you human, Mr. Carroll,' she responded, with a spice of satire in her tone.

'I hope so,' Mark answered. 'Will you let

me tell you one thing, Miss Lording? For a man bred as I was, I've been horribly poor. My profession never brought me a penny, and if it hadn't been for Tom I don't know what I should have done. Financially, I've always been a lame dog, and Tom has always been helping me over the stile at the expense of his own pocket. I remember those things, Miss Lording, and I'm not the man to do him an ill turn in answer to all the good turns he has done for me.'

'Mr. Carroll,' said the girl, quite vanquished, 'I am very sorry to have misjudged you.' She held out her hand, and Mark reached across his saddle and accepted it with the air of a courtier before a queen.

In the glow of her partisanship for Tom she felt almost certain of herself. Baretti was away, and at times she prayed that she might never see him again. And sometimes the warmth and tenderness of her feeling for Tom so carried

her away that she would wonder at her interest in his friend, and the unknown and curious longing which possessed her when she thought of him. But even when it was that very warmth and tenderness for Tom which brought Baretti into her mind, she would fall into a delicious day-dream about the artist, from which she would awake with terror.

As for Mark, he had for the time at least justified his position. He took to writing little notes to Miss Lording in a cousinly, confidential way, reporting the softened feelings which seemed to be making way in Mr. Carroll's breast, and in a little while the girl began to look on him with friendly eyes, helped by her father's constant belief in him.

‘Why,’ the old fellow would say, ‘he fought his hardest at the time in Tom's behalf, when he knew perfectly well what was going to happen. He begged me to come down and mediate with that pig-headed fellow, his uncle,

to prevent him from disinheriting Tom. A very fine, unselfish, good-hearted lad is Mark. A bit of a Quixote, like his cousin, but that's a family trait.'

Mark, confident in his own astuteness, played this game of his without fear of detection. It was a habit of his to talk aloud or half aloud when in solitude.

'“The goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities to a land not inhabited,”' said Mark, smilingly, as he walked in the grounds of Trench House one morning. He had met the Lordings an hour earlier, and they had been beautifully friendly with him. 'All these nice people would be ready enough to lay their own faults on me and drive me out if—— I seem pretty safely settled in the pasture now. If anybody is injured by my being here it's the girl who is going to marry Tom, and if she speaks well of me it's a high testimonial. What a nice girl she is! So charmingly unworldly!

How faithfully she holds on to Tom in his poverty ! And how sure she is that in a month or two he'll be as well off as ever ! . . . Tom, my boy, I'm afraid you'll have to turn out quite a bad sort of fellow. I remember, for instance, that you made a single visit to the house of one Signor Malfi—a single visit, Tom, and there was such a rumpus between husband and wife that they separated. But we can do much better than that for you with a little thinking. I'm afraid your interest in Miss Moore was equivocal, Tom—equivocal. I'm afraid—I'm afraid it's likely to turn out so ; and there's Scripture for it, Tom. “ The goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities to a land not inhabited.” I shall have to be desperately sorry, but I'm afraid it will be a Christian duty, therefore unavoidable. So far as my experience serves me, a Christian duty — therefore unavoidable — is generally beastly nasty for one side, and pleasantly profitable for the other.'

It was characteristic of Mark that at this time he spoke of his cousin with great freedom to almost anybody who would listen to him, and that he always used the most eulogistic terms.

‘My uncle will come round,’ he would say laughingly. ‘He’s one of the best fellows in the world, and I can see him melting daily. Tom’s a splendid fellow, and it’s a pity to see such a father and son at loggerheads even for a moment. I shan’t lose by their reconciliation ; for the simple reason that I never had any claim on the property, and never could have. And if I bring them together, I have a claim on the gratitude of both of them.’ Mark’s bonhomie would be irresistible whilst he talked in this fashion, and his candour was wonderfully inviting. ‘It’s a very good thing for a poor dog like me, because it makes Tom my friend for life when I’ve smoothed over his difficulties for him. What an ill wind it is that blows good to nobody.’

The general impression about Mark Carroll was that he was a good-natured, rather easy-going fellow, who was nobody's enemy—not even his own.

‘When I perform my Christian duty,’ he would say sometimes, ‘what a dangerous witness I shall be.’

CHAPTER XV.

THERE are many shabby streets on the Surrey side of the water, and many grades of shabbiness amongst them. Streets sunk into complete poverty and hardship, but bearing some trace of better times upon them ; streets born into poverty and hardship, skimpily bred from their beginning, but fighting hard to look genteel ; streets where decent window curtains and the bit of worthless coral under a glass shade in the window make just such a protest against their abject surroundings as the mended gloves, the suspiciously shiny hat, and the patched boots of the ratepayers within—a protest altogether inefficient and mournful ; streets more desert than Sahara, as desolate in the sunshine

as the Bog of Allan in the rain ; streets on which to enter is to be depressed. Cemeteries for live people with no flowers to make them bright. Miles of mean sarcophagi on end.

In one such street, the type of many, the houses are built of a dirtyish yellowish brick, and the line runs on for nearly half a mile in a staring monotony of hopeless ugliness. Frost-bitten parlours lie behind the dwarfed railings of cabined areas, and the little curio of the resident stands plumb in the centre of the mean window ; a bit of coral, a set of Indian chessmen, wounded, with the white Queen missing ; a waxen apple of an unhealthy saffron tinge, with a hectic dash of rouge on each cheek ; a looking-glass pond six inches wide with a dirty lily on it. Always, at the top of the glass shade, there is a dejected circle of crotchet-work, which goes to prove that the owners of the frost-bitten parlours are not so harried by

the cares of life but that they can find time to do something useless.

The houses in this street are so aggravatingly alike that these trophies are memorable to the wayfarer. A hand of white biscuit china holding a prettily shaped cup, in which rested a bouquet of real flowers, ought to have been noticeable to any passer by. Perhaps it was that which stopped Tom Carroll's footsteps at the door.

His hand was raised towards the black varnished knocker—gluey even in the winter time, and always indisposed to fulfil its functions—when the door was opened for him, and a bright face offered him a shy, unspoken welcome. The girl's figure—for the shy, bright face was a girl's—was tall, and lithe, and full; she was not exactly pretty, but was perhaps better than pretty; her eyes were beyond doubt beautiful (a soft, warm brown in colour), and her lips had that mobile and sensitive look

which almost everybody has known to make a plain face charming.

‘Good morning, Miss Moore,’ said Tom. ‘I trust your father is better.’

‘I think he is—a little,’ answered the girl, holding the door at its widest, and squeezing herself against the wall of the narrow passage to make room for the visitor to get by. ‘He is downstairs, Mr. Carroll. It is the warmest room in the house.’

Tom found his way down a breakneck flight of steps, of a width befitting a doll’s mansion, and a depth altogether disproportionate. The girl followed with a lighter and more accustomed foot, and passing by him, threw open the door which led into the family vault, or front kitchen. There, in a stuffed arm-chair by the fire, sat the elder Carroll’s late tenant, wizened in feature and stiff-set in expression.

‘You are better, Moore?’ Tom asked, bending over him.

‘No,’ said the farmer in a wasted voice. ‘Nor never shall be. Better? Where’s the chance of bettering a case like mine?’

‘Father, dear,’ said Azubah, ‘you mustn’t be despondent.’

‘Mustn’t I?’ he asked, turning his unnaturally bright eyes upon her. ‘Why not?’

‘Come, father,’ said the girl, seating herself by him, and stroking a thin hand, ‘you are not always like this.’

‘No,’ he answered, with a contortion of the stiffened features which would have been a smile if he could. ‘The best of men are not always wise. There’s one cure for my disease—churchyard mould—churchyard mould!’

Tom thought this likely enough to be true, but it is not easy to sit by and acquiesce in that sort of prescription. ‘Come, come, Moore,’ said the young man, a little feebly.

‘God bless my soul, sir,’ said the farmer, in that thin and husky voice of his, ‘there’s a bit

of sense left in the world yet, if I'm the only owner of it. I can't be cured, and I've got to be endured. There, there, Zubah, take it easy. But never ask me if I'm better again, Mister Thomas, for that sets my back up. When I'm better, bury me; it'll be all I shall be fit for.'

It was so unpleasant to sit by and listen to this without being able to contradict it that Tom broke in at once with the object of his visit.

'What about this dairy, Moore? Mrs. Moore knows all about the quality of the things, and you might have a shopwoman.'

The farmer, with his withered hands clasping his shrunken knees, stared at the fire for a time without answering.

'It's like you to make the offer, sir, and I won't say no to it. I haven't got the right to say no to it. You must let us pay you interest on the money till we can pay back the

principal, if the thing prospers—and I don't see why it shouldn't.

‘Very well,’ said Tom, ‘that’s a bargain.’ He had promised himself this delight before his father’s displeasure had fallen upon him. It took five hundred pounds from his resources, but he had not felt the pinch of impecuniosity as yet, and had no fear of it. It is the burnt child that dreads the fire.

‘The missis has been up to the place,’ said the farmer, ‘and Bethesda’s been with her. They think that—stock and goodwill together—it’s worth the money. You don’t know Bethesda, Mr. Thomas? He’s a little over-pious for my taste, is Bethesda, but I think he means well, and he’s a keenish man of business.’

At this moment the sticky little black knocker on the front door came into reluctant action, and Azubah, ascending to answer the summons, returned in a moment with Mr.

Bethesda behind her. Tom had not been greatly noticing the girl whilst he and the father had been talking, but he had a general sense of her presence in the room, and that general sense had been agreeable. There are people who diffuse an atmosphere of sympathy, and thus put all in their presence at ease and make them natural. Azubah was one of these people, but when Tom looked at her as she came marching into the room, with Mr. Bethesda's large person and holy smile in her train, he found a sudden contradiction in her look. She was decidedly not sympathetic any longer, but on a sudden had become quite hard and frozen.

‘My friend!’ said Mr. Bethesda, advancing to the invalid and taking one thin hand between his own fat palms. ‘My Christian brother!’

‘My Christian friend!’ returned the farmer, with an unmoved face. He followed Mr. Be-

thesda's portly form with an observant, glittering eye. That gentleman bowed to Tom, and smiled his humble and beneficent smile at him. 'This is Mr. Carroll, Bethesda,' said the farmer, 'the gentleman who is so good as to advance me the money for that little business.' Mr. Bethesda smiled at Tom again, as if to reward him for his kindness. 'This is my Christian friend Bethesda, Mr. Thomas. I was speaking of him when he knocked, and saying he was a trifle over-pious for my taste, but a keenish man of business, and I think he means well.'

'Our friend is a caustic humorist,' said Mr. Bethesda to Tom; 'a caustic humorist is our friend.'

'I was telling Mr. Carroll,' said the farmer, with a waste-sounding cough or two behind his hand, 'that you'd seen the place and looked it over, and that you think it'll be a good investment.'

'With care and prudence, an admirable

investment,' returned Mr. Bethesda. 'The shop is well-appointed and respectably situated. There is no rival establishment in the neighbourhood. *You* have seen the establishment, also, I believe, Miss Moore?' Azubah inclined her head ever so little and looked harder than before. 'A thriving neighbourhood,' said Mr. Bethesda, 'and a connection likely to increase.'

'Well, Mr. Thomas,' said the farmer, 'you see that you have put us in a fair way to keep our feet again. I shall be a drag on the place for a time, but I can't last for ever, thank God, and when I am gone they'll do very well, I have no doubt.'

'Father,' cried the girl in a pained voice, 'you must not talk like that.'

'Well, well, my dear,' said her father; 'well, well.'

'We do not live by bread alone,' said Mr. Bethesda. 'The family affections are precious.'

He turned to Azubah as if to ask her sympathy for this observation, but the girl purposely avoided his glance, and Mr. Bethesda's smile sat somewhat forlornly upon his features.

'Is the new place far from here?' asked Tom, more for the sake of breaking in upon the talk than for the sake of the question.

'You haven't seen it?' asked the farmer. 'Take Mr. Carroll round and show it him, Azubah, if he'd like to see it. A bit of a walk will do you good. You'll give me my game of chess, Bethesda. Get the board, Azubah.'

Mr. Bethesda's assent to the proposal for a game at chess was given readily enough, and he sat down to the table and arranged the men, whilst the girl ran upstairs to dress for out of doors.

'Who is Mr. Bethesda?' asked Tom, when he and the girl were in the street.

'He is Mr. Bethesda,' she answered. Her whole manner had changed, and she was her

genial, sympathetic self again. “I do not like thee, Dr. Fell.”

‘I thought as much,’ said Tom. ‘He doesn’t look a bad sort of fellow, though.’

‘He is a very good man, I believe,’ answered Azubah, ‘and he has been very kind to father, but ——’

‘Exactly!’ said Tom. ‘A common case enough.’ They walked in silence for a minute.

‘I have never told you, Mr. Carroll,’ said the girl suddenly, ‘how you came to see me at that dreadful place. I can’t bear that you should think I went there knowingly. It was Signora Malfi who took me there, and I don’t think that even she quite knew what sort of place it was.’

‘Miss Moore,’ said Tom, ‘I don’t think Signora Malfi is the sort of person for a young girl to know.’

‘Indeed!’ she answered, a little coldly.

‘Indeed!’ said Tom, gently affirmative.

‘It is not like you, Mr. Carroll,’ said Azubah, with the air of one who speaks more in sorrow than in anger, though with a little tinge of anger too, ‘it is not like you to speak ill of a poor woman who is deserted by her husband.’

‘Deserted?’ asked Tom. ‘I knew nothing of that.’

‘Yes,’ said the girl. ‘She told me all the story. Her husband was jealous of an English gentleman who gave her English lessons, and he actually turned her out of doors.’

This set Tom thinking, and kept him silent and inattentive whilst Azubah defended the Signora. Mark, then, had been right in his belief about the lady, and she *had* been in love with him. It was well, anyway, that Mark was not to blame, and that he had a good conscience in the matter; for Tom’s ideal of virtue was lofty, and to most young men of the world in his era would have looked absurd. He came out of his reverie to hear Azubah

talking of the Signora still, and saying what a brave struggle she had made.

‘She goes on singing at that place?’ he asked. ‘The Megatherium?’

‘What else can she do?’ answered the girl defensively. ‘She must make a living. There is no harm in singing there ; though I couldn’t bear to do it.’

‘I didn’t mean to blame her,’ Tom answered. ‘She makes an honest living there, and the artistic demands of her audience are not beyond her powers.’

‘Don’t you think she’s an artist, Mr. Carroll?’

Tom laughed as he looked round at her, and shook his head.

‘No,’ he answered. ‘Whatever else she is, she is not an artist.’ Azubah looked depressed at this verdict. There was no going beyond Mr. Carroll’s judgment in the matter of music. ‘About yourself, Miss Moore,’ said Tom, a

moment later, 'if you would study you could sing.'

'I hope to be able to study now,' she answered, thinking of the bettered prospects of her father's household. To think of those prospects was naturally to think of the man who had given them, and who now walked at her side. The shy, grateful, upward glance she cast at him expressed much, but he missed it.

'It is worth trying,' said Tom. 'For its own sake in the first place, of course, and for the pleasure it enables you to give to others. But there are solid advantages to be gained.'

'I wish I had been born a boy,' she said suddenly, in answer to the ambitions these words aroused in her mind. She blushed fiercely a second later at her own vehemence.

'You want to go out and fight the world?' asked Tom. After the Megatherium experience that was an easy guess.

'I should like to,' she answered, blushing

still. 'I should like to be able to do something besides pricking my fingers with needlework.'

'It is a sort of duty to do whatever you have a power to do,' said Tom. 'That's rather a loosely-constructed aphorism, by the way,' he added, with a laugh. 'I mean, of course, "provided it be virtuous," as the clergyman said to the antiquary's sister.'

She was not so shy with him as she would have been with any other young man of his years. They had known each other ever since she could remember, and he had never made her feel the difference which existed in their social position. She had always known the difference, but it had never come home to her disagreeably. And he was not merely her old companion, but he was both an artist and a man. He knew the world, and the world of art within it, and he could sympathise with her if she laid bare before him her own hopes, and he could tell her how far they bade fair to be

realised. She burned with all this, and her desire struggled with her shyness, until at last it won, and she spoke, though with a good deal of tremor.

‘Do you think, Mr. Carroll, that I could ever be an artist?’

‘A musician? Yes. Certainly.’

‘Do you think that if I worked hard I could make money, by-and-by, as a singer?’

‘Yes,’ he said again; ‘certainly.’ He did not quite like the question about money. He himself had never felt the want of it; and he said in a grave way: ‘An ambition is not likely to lead you far beyond itself, Miss Moore. You must have a loftier aim than that if you wish to be an artist.’

‘Yes,’ she said simply; ‘but I am obliged to think of money too. I should like to do something for father, and I should like to take the heavier cares off mother’s shoulders. That is why I asked about money.’

‘That is quite right,’ he answered. ‘You will cost them something in the first instance, and it is only just that you should wish to repay it. You were taking lessons from Signora Malfi, were you not? You must choose a better instructor. It will not be difficult to find one. Will you leave the choice in my hands?’

She assented gratefully, and the impracticable young man laid another burden upon himself at once. Moore would never be able to pay the terms of the teacher of music to whom Tom intended that the girl should go; but he could make a private arrangement, and so save the farmer’s pocket and his pride at the same time. It would only be a hundred or two, and he could save it in other ways, and besides that there was the opera, now nearly finished, and ready to be placed. Nobody as yet knew what an El Dorado the performance of that great work might lead to.

The teacher of Tom's choice was not the man whose name stood highest in London, but, in Tom's opinion, he was far and away the best, and it was likely that the young man's judgment was not greatly at fault. By special arrangement the teacher's terms were so subdued that the farmer was able to pay them, and Tom made up the difference.

The Moores knew nothing of his fall from fortune, though it is probable that he would have told them of it candidly enough had it come about in another way, and if they had not been in want of his assistance. And he himself was not fully persuaded that his father was immovable. Mark's letters, for one thing, were always cheering, and if they were to be believed his father was beginning to recognise the injustice with which he had acted. Tom could not fail to see how handsome and manly it was in Mark to try to throw himself out of the saddle in his behalf, and he felt extremely

kind and grateful towards his cousin. A virtue which in himself would have seemed downright commonplace and inevitable was admirable in another in his eyes. This is not often the case with people, but then Tom Carroll was abnormally generous and sympathetic, looking much more at another man's side of a case than at his own, and seeing his own interests minified and another man's interest magnified, everywhere and always. That was not the practice of worldly wisdom, and, in short, he was a young man born to be choused, hoodwinked, and borrowed from. The chousers and borrowers mistook him for a fool, naturally enough, but then human estimates of human qualities and motives were made to differ from the beginning.

The opera, being finished, was submitted to various authorities, and Tom Carroll began to know something of the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes. Nobody openly

insulted him, but he saw his own work passed over for work which he knew to be inferior, only it had known names attached to it, and failed without imperilling the judgment of managers. The thing that galled him most was that publishers and critics and managers would let the score lie for a month together untouched, and then, on being reminded of its existence, would send it back with the seals unbroken. He was an impetuous young man, and at last, and after not so very long a time either, he came to an impetuous resolution. He would take a theatre on his own hook, bring out the opera in English as it stood, score a magnificent success—‘*cela va sans dire*’ to youthful genius, confident of itself—and shame all these sleepy and unawakenable wretches, who had missed their share of the glory. Also he would coin a pile of money, and rejoice in the sight of their cupidity from his own Tom Tiddler’s Ground, whilst he picked up gold

and silver which their itching fingers could not reach. He took nobody's advice about this step, and let nobody know of it.

To begin with, he examined his funds and found himself with a trifle over seven thousand pounds in hand. What might it take to bring out an opera in really befitting style? Two thousand pounds? He decided on that as being ample, sold his consols, and set the result to his own private account at the bank. Next he issued an advertisement, 'Wanted, the services of a competent and experienced theatrical manager.' This, appearing in the 'Era,' drew on him a very snow-storm of correspondence, addressed to Alpha, of such and such a number, in Ely Place. He sat over the letters for days, bewildered by an embarrassment of choice. It appeared beyond belief that there were or ever had been such a number of theatrical managers in England as he found to answer his advertisement. But there were only a few amongst

the mass who gave reliable and definite information about themselves and their antecedents, and having gradually winnowed these from the others, he sat down to weigh and consider their respective probabilities. After deep cogitation he selected one A.B. as being the most promising, and wrote to the said A.B. requesting an interview. A.B. had for six years managed the Oberon and for five the Garrick. His record at each of these popular houses was unimpeachable and open to inquiry. He had for the past six or seven years retired from active labour, but private speculations had proved unfortunate, and he was willing to enter the ring again. Thus A.B., who wrote in a large hand, and a somewhat ponderous and polysyllabic style. Rectitude, business capacity, and misfortune in private speculation seemed, taken in conjunction, to promise well to Tom Carroll. The meeting was appointed to take place at Tom's own chambers,

on a certain Monday, at mid-day, and the young fellow sat alone expectant. A ring at the bell apprised him of the probable arrival of his visitor; a knock at the door announced the visitor nearer.

‘Come in,’ cried Tom.

‘A gentleman to see you, sir,’ said the maid, ‘by appointment.’

And to Tom Carroll’s wonder he beheld the portly form and the amiable smile of Mr. Anthony Bethesda.

‘Good morning, Mr. Carroll,’ said Mr. Bethesda, beaming humility and benevolence. ‘I received your letter, and though I did not know but that the name might be that of another gentleman, I half fancied that it might prove that you had some knowledge of me.’

Mr. Bethesda’s garments were still decidedly clerical in cut, but his white necktie had been set aside in favour of a black stock, and he looked like a bishop in a mild disguise.

‘I should not have thought that theatrical management had been at all in your line, Mr. Bethesda,’ said Tom, recovering a little from his surprise.

‘I began life upon the boards,’ returned Mr. Bethesda, ‘and until the year ’63 I remained in active connection with stage life. My record is remembered yet, I have reason to believe, and if you will take the trouble to refer to the gentlemen whose names I have given, they will speak of me favourably.’

‘Yes?’ said Tom, and demanded his terms. Mr. Bethesda gave them, and they seemed moderate enough.

‘Whether I should be so fortunate as to meet your approbation or not, Mr. Carroll,’ said the applicant, ‘I should like to ask one favour of you, if I may. May I rely upon you not to mention this application—at present at least—to any person you may happen to know in the immediate neighbourhood of my present

residence. I know the prejudice which exists amongst the breth——amongst religious people as a mass against the theatrical profession, and I might damage my own usefulness if my return or intended return to my old line of life were known.'

'I have to concern myself with nothing, Mr. Bethesda,' said Tom, 'but your fitness for the position you ask for. If you have any private confidences, I shall respect them. I want a first-rate theatrical manager, and I must have one.'

'I was said to be a first-rate manager in my day,' said Mr. Bethesda, meekly, 'and I have forgotten nothing. Except the profanity which once seemed necessary to the due fulfilment of a manager's duties.'

'Well, Mr. Bethesda,' said Tom, 'I shall make inquiries in the direction your letter points me to, and I'll let you know within the week.'

Mr. Bethesda withdrew, and Tom set about his inquiries that afternoon.

‘Bethesda?’ said the manager of the Oberon. ‘Bethesda? Oh, yes! I knew Bethesda. Competent? Rayther. Smart man was Bethesda—very smart indeed. Honest and reliable? We-ell, I should *think* so. Never heard anything against him. Left everything here in apple-pie order. Gave perfect satisfaction. Mr. Bethesda coming back to business, sir? A decided acquisition, I should say, to any house in London.’

So far good. Future inquiries confirmed this favourable verdict, and Mr. Bethesda was engaged.

‘Now, my first step, Mr. Bethesda,’ said Tom, ‘will be to rent a theatre.’

‘I have made inquiries already,’ said the new manager. ‘The Garrick is in the market. Rent two thousand.’

Tom Carroll whistled, but a moment’s

reflection reassured him. It would be ridiculous to include the year's rent of a theatre in your estimate for bringing out a work. You *must* have a theatre to begin with.

'First-rate house,' said Mr. Bethesda. 'Enjoys a good reputation, and is in fair repair. Has an admirable situation also. Shall I see about it?'

'Yes,' said Tom, with a little inward chill, 'you'd better see about it.'

'And what are we going to produce, sir?'

asked Mr. Bethesda.

'Opera,' said Tom.

'Bouffe?' asked Mr. Bethesda.

'No. Serious opera.'

'Italian?' asked Mr. Bethesda again.

'No. English.'

It was Mr. Bethesda's turn to whistle.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN four or five weeks' time the piece running at the Garrick dried up for want of audiences, and Tom entered upon his lease. Mr. Bethesda placed cunning paragraphs here and there, and did his best to excite public interest in the new fortunes of the house. The lessee and the manager held many lengthy consultations as to the artistes to be engaged, and Tom was for having everybody of the best to be got for love or money ; but he paled a little at the terms people asked. He began to see in a fortnight or thereabouts that he was risking nearly everything, and that a failure would break him. This discovery, after depressing him for a little time, awoke all his energies, and he worked and

schemed all the day and half the night. It was impossible to get together such a body of performers as he wished for without considerable delay, but before eight weeks had gone by since Mr. Bethesda's engagement, the band was in rehearsal daily, and Tom was conducting in person.

At the second or third rehearsal, Mr. Bethesda entered with a card between his thumb and finger. He waited for a pause, and then handed the bit of pasteboard to his employer.

'I was unwilling to disturb you, sir,' he said, 'but the gentleman was so certain that you would admit him——'

'Where is he?' cried Tom, throwing down his bâton. In another minute he was in the corridor of the house, shaking hands with Baretti. 'My dear old fellow! How glad I am to see you! Why didn't you let me know of your coming? Come in, come in.'

Baretti came in, after shaking hands half a dozen times.

‘I reached London this morning,’ he said, ‘and they told me at the old place where I should find you. What are you doing? Is your opera accepted?’

‘Yes,’ said Tom, gaily. In spite of his anxieties he could be gay again at the sight of his friend. ‘The opera is accepted by the lessee of the Garrick Theatre, Mr. Thomas Carroll.’

‘You have taken the house?’ asked Baretti, and Tom nodded in response. ‘Let me listen to the rehearsal. I must not interrupt your work. Go on.’

Tom resumed the bâton and the work went on again, the little artist beating time with his hand and nodding his head to the music, as he stood in the dusk behind. The composer was ready to dismiss the band earlier than usual, for he was eager to talk with Baretti, but the

new arrival would not hear of this, and the customary day's work was gone through. When the two friends at last quitted the theatre and reached the clearer light of open day, Tom saw how pale Baretti was, and noticed a look of pain and trouble in his face.

‘I have not been well,’ the painter answered to his inquiries, ‘and I have been uncomfortable. There is nobody at Naples. It was sad to be there, Carroll. The old friends are dead, or they have wandered away, or they are changed, and Naples is no place for me any longer.’

‘Have you been working too hard?’ asked Tom. ‘You look as if you had.’

‘Perhaps I have,’ said Baretti. ‘I have had nothing but work to occupy me, and I have felt restless when away from it.’

Tom took the little man home, and they spent the whole afternoon in talk.

‘The scenery goes for something,’ said the

painter, as they sat smoking together. 'Have you made arrangements for it?'

'I have left all that to the manager,' Tom answered. 'It is in hand, I know, but I don't know who has it.'

'You must let me paint one scene, at least,' said Baretti, decisively; 'I must have a finger in the pie.'

'So you shall, old fellow,' cried the other, and they began to talk business, Tom laying down the lines of the opera, and Baretti listening, pencil in hand, and sketching as he listened.

The artist had not spoken of Mary, though she was uppermost in his thoughts, but he began to glide towards the mention of her name.

'Your father,' he said, as he stooped over his drawing, 'is he well?'

'I believe so,' answered Tom.

'And all the people at Overhill?'

'They are all well according to the latest

advices,' said Tom, trying to speak carelessly. He could not as yet bring himself to tell of the separation which had taken place.

'I had expected to hear of your marriage before this,' said Baretti, quietly.

'That is deferred for a time,' said Tom.

'Deferred?' asked Baretti, without looking up. 'There is nothing the matter?'

'Well, there is,' Tom answered, reluctantly. 'I am not on very good terms with my father just at present.'

'He disapproves of your having taken the theatre?'

'No,' said Tom. 'He doesn't know of it. It's another matter. I'd rather not talk about it now, Baretti, if you don't mind.'

'I beg your pardon,' said the little man. The marriage deferred? What might that mean? That devil of Egotism, who lies in wait for every man, sprang out at him, and assailed him. Was there a straw of hope to cling to

after all? But Baretti, in the dreary and lonesome days which had gone by since his departure from England, had slain that demon too often to be conquered by him now, and he put the tempting thought away from him. Only he felt that if he had guessed at any hitch, or the possibility of any hitch in Tom Carroll's love affairs, he would have stayed away from England still.

The upper rooms being still vacant, Baretti took them again and worked there as of yore. When he first met Carroll on his return he had noticed no change in him, but with intimate intercourse there came times when the youngster was off his guard and let his careworn face peep out from beneath the mask of cheerfulness he habitually wore. And the more careworn and anxious Tom looked, the oftener, and with the more force, Baretti's demon of egotistic hope assailed him, until the painter felt wretched with his own temptations, and

ashamed of his own baseness, though he fought them like a hero. He would sit over his cigar in his friend's room of a night, watching Tom's thoughtful and anxious countenance with a look which his own self-accusations made tenderer and more watchful than it would otherwise have been, and once or twice the new lessee caught this fixed gaze, and seemed to read a sort of reproach in it. If he were sure of anything in the world he was sure of Baretti's friendship, and so honest a devotion merited confidence. And besides that—setting his own delicacy apart—he wanted sympathy, and he was beginning to be sadly in need of hope, and he knew that Baretti would have both for him in plenty. So at last he told the story.

He met the little man's brooding, watchful glance so full one night, and his own glance recognised so completely the anxiety and friendship of it, that Baretti arose and laid both hands upon his shoulders.

‘Carroll,’ he said, ‘I do not ask you for any confidence you do not care to give, but you are in trouble. Can I help you? Any way? You can ask me nothing that I will not at least try to do. You know that?’

It was in answer to this appeal that the story came out. There was a terrible temptation to Baretti’s selfish hopes in it, but he listened quietly and fought his demon, and gave Tom in full measure all the sympathy and all the prophecy of ultimate success he stood in need of.

‘Lording was right,’ cried the painter, marching up and down the room in his old way. ‘The money cannot be allowed to make a difference. And you are right also. Justify your own aspirations. Work! This is no world for idle people. Sweet are the uses of adversity, which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head. It is not natural to think that your

father will always be wrong, and you will be all the better for having been thrown for a time upon your own resources. You will be a great man, Carroll. I tell you so, and I know what music should be. You have a spark of the fire Prometheus stole.'

'I shall work,' said Tom, a little shame-faced as usual, at Baretti's enthusiasm. His friends at least believed in him, and everybody knows what a help that is in any sort of doubtful enterprise.

'You will work,' said Baretti, 'and you will prosper. England is in need of some man to come to the front in music. When the right man comes she will answer.'

'Yes,' said Tom, 'when the right man comes!'

'Work!' cried the painter, again turning upon him vehemently. 'Believe yourself the right man, and do justice to the conviction. I never paint a picture which does not seem

whilst I paint it the most excellent and beautiful in the world. I can see its faults a week after, but if it had faults whilst I worked at it I could do nothing. Believe in yourself. It is the only way to greatness.'

Tom broke out laughing, and at that Barette laughed also.

'But there is something in what I say, after all,' said the little man, with extreme gravity, a moment later.

At this juncture the maid tapped at the door, and, being invited to enter, asked for Mr. Barette.

'A gentleman to see you, sir,' said the maid. 'I went to your own room, sir, but I thought you might be here.'

Barette took the card from the salver the maid carried.

'Ask the gentleman to walk up to my rooms,' he said. 'This is my friend, Malfi,' turning to Tom. 'You remember meeting

him once with me? I will bring him down by-and-by, and we will have a little music.'

Now Tom was not particularly anxious to meet Signor Malfi after what had happened with respect to cousin Mark, but he had no such active objections to him that he could bring himself to forbid him his rooms. He could at a future time give Baretti a hint of what had happened, and Malfi would not be likely to come again. The painter went upstairs to meet his friend, and Tom lit his pipe and sat down to his score. Even now that the opera was in full rehearsal he could scarcely keep his fingers off it.

Baretti was lighting the gas when Signor Malfi presented himself. He kissed the artist on both cheeks, and the artist kissed him on both cheeks, and then they sat down and began to chatter animatedly about trifles.

'And how is Madame?' asked Baretti in a minute or two. The singer stretched out a

hand against him, as if to push that theme away.

‘What is the matter?’ asked the other in surprise.

‘I have dismissed her,’ said Malfi, darkly. ‘She played me false. I have never thought of blaming you for it, but you began it.’

‘I began it?’ cried Baretti, in amazement.

‘You met me with Caterina one day in the streets,’ explained the singer. ‘There were two Englishmen in your company. One of them spoke Italian.’

‘Malfi,’ said the painter, ‘they are both as honourable and open as the day.’

Signor Malfi’s loud laugh of scorn at this declaration was not pleasant to listen to, nor was his face pleasant to look at when he laughed.

‘If you suspect either of them, you wrong yourself,’ said Baretti.

‘He used to visit her, I tell you,’ cried the

operatic tenor, leaping to his feet, and declaiming with prodigious gesture, ‘under pretence of teaching her his own accursed language. I hired an attic on the other side of the street, and watched them through my glasses for hours together, and saw them kissing one another. I tracked her one night to his rooms, and though he had hidden her somewhere when I followed her, I knew that she was there. He came out when I had gone to see if I were altogether out of the way, and in a little while she left his rooms alone. I followed her home and told her what I knew. It was a wonder I did not kill her then and there.’ If he had been half as enraged then as the telling of the story made him, it looked a wonder still. His swarthy face had taken an ugly tint of whitish-green, and his heavy lips were pallid, and so dry that at times he had to moisten them with his tongue. ‘I told her what I knew, and she proclaimed it all and ^ddared me.’

Baretti sat silent.

‘I bade her go,’ pursued Malfi, ‘and I threatened him. I told her that he should not live to boast of his conquest. Then this came out—that my visit to his rooms, whilst she was there, had so frightened him that *he* had cast her off. “You may leave him to me,” said Caterina. She will kill him,’ he continued, with a rejoicing smile, ‘and then the law will hang her, and I shall have a safe revenge upon them both.’

This reflection appeared to soothe him. He smoothed all his ruffled feathers at once, and, sitting down, lit a cigar and smoked it, with the rejoicing smile now broadening and now fading in his eyes. Baretti had been ready with a question, which was stopped by this last statement. He had been about to ask how it was that the Signora had not run to her lover when Malfi sent her packing, but the query was answered beforehand, and he sat silent. The

singer also kept silence for a while, and, being left to himself, gradually assumed his ordinary aspect and manner; and they talked about indifferent things indifferently for half-an-hour, when Malfi rose to go. Baretti saw him out, and on his return to his own room was waylaid by Carroll.

‘You didn’t bring Malfi down, after all,’ said Tom. ‘To tell you the truth, I’m glad of it. I don’t want to meet him. There has been some disturbance between him and my cousin Mark.’

‘You knew of that?’ asked Baretti.

‘Yes,’ said Tom. ‘It seems that Malfi wasn’t married to that woman whom he called his wife. Mark gave her lessons in English, and she took such a fancy to him that he got afraid of her and asked me to go and sit at the lessons to keep clear of scandal. I went once, and no more. But the lessons seem to have come to an abrupt termination; Malfi got jealous, and the woman left him.’

‘She was not his wife?’ said Baretti. ‘I did not know that.’ Tom’s account of the matter threw a new light upon it, and he was puzzled as to the true colour and dimensions of the whole affair.

‘Has Malfi said anything to you about it?’ inquired Tom.

‘Yes,’ said Baretti, and began to tell Malfi’s story.

‘I tell you exactly how it is,’ said Tom, when the painter had finished. ‘The woman pestered Mark, as was fairly well proved by his asking me to go with him—she hunted him up at his chambers—this jealous Malfi fellow follows her—Mark to avoid a row hides her, and tells her afterwards that she must bother him no more. It’s as plain as a pikestaff.’

Baretti said nothing and seemed to acquiesce in Tom’s view of the case, but the whole thing set him thinking. He was not by nature of a very suspicious turn of mind, and he had been

well disposed to Mark Carroll, but the idea had got fixed in him somehow or other that Mark had been making a catspaw of his unsuspecting cousin. Baretti's life had not been what Tom's had been, and to an Italian youngster Mark's affected prudery looked affected. And having regard to Mark's present position in relation to Tom's affairs, the painter began to think that any attempt to hoodwink the said Tom would speak poorly for Mark's bona fides. Baretti would have thought little enough of an intrigue—until he fell in love—but he would have managed it by himself, and would not have tried to drag into it another who was innocent of it. If Mark had acted as he guessed, Mark was not to be trusted. Everything was vague enough just now, but there was ground for suspicion, and Baretti was uneasy in his friend's behalf.

His uneasiness led him to ask after a little time for a look at Mark's letters, and they more

than half converted him, they were so hearty in their tone, and recognised so plainly the impossible motive of the elder Carroll's wishes. 'In the meantime,' wrote Mark, 'I am, of course, in clover, and if it were not for a sense of your anxieties I should be comfortable. But there is nothing to be feared at the finish, and you have, in your mother's fortune, enough to live on for a dozen years in comfort, even if your father's mistaken animosity could last so long. But he is melting day by day, and though a constant advocacy would be injudicious with a man of his determined temper, I put in a word when I can, and it is easy to see that in a little while he will begin to show symptoms of relenting. Don't answer me, for I dare not have it known that I am in correspondence with you. And I rely upon you not to offend your father with me either now or hereafter by any proclamation of the part I played. I am too poor to dare to offend him.' This all seemed

honest enough, and it was hard in the face of it to retain suspicion, but Baretti was still a little uncertain, and would fain have kept a watch on Mark if he had seen the way to do

It had appeared upon inquiry that there was ample room for Baretti's efforts towards the fitting production of Tom's opera, and the devoted one spent a week or two in hard work at the designing of scenes and in superintending their execution. The acute Bethesda circulated new paragraphs respecting this. The celebrated artist had been specially retained to design the scenery and dresses. Baretti's recent pictures had brought his name a good deal to the front, and the announcement was not without its value.

Tom wrote to Lording that the great work would appear at a given date, and the old boy took Mary up to town to hear and see it. The furniture in the town-house was stripped of its

brown-holland grave-clothes—for why should the young people be kept apart more than need be?—and Tom, of course, was free of the house and went and came as he pleased. Lord-
ing took to haunting the theatre, and was amazingly proud to meet singers in the actual pursuit of their vocation behind scenes. Mr. Bethesda was publicly announced as Lessee and manager, and Lording had no idea of Tom's venture in the business. The youngster was sorry for the deception, but Lording knew his financial position so well that Tom foresaw a quarrel, or something very like it, if the truth should be revealed. The elder would have been sure to want to share the risk, and Tom had fully determined that nobody else should endanger a penny. He lived in alternate hope and dread. Success meant everything he wished for. Failure meant the complete extinguishment of his hopes, except in the improbable contingency of his father's relenting. The

young man's hopes and fears were in proportion to the reality of affairs, and his face looked worried and anxious.

But no hopes and fears can stop or hasten the course of the days, and the great night took its own time in coming. The house was crammed in all the better parts, but the gallery was sparsely peopled. Nobody took notice of that significant fact except Mr. Bethesda. Toim conducted in person on this first night, and Lording and Mary had a private box almost immediately above him. Baretti sat in the stalls, and saw them when he came in. They saw him also, and he was constrained to acknowledge their presence, though he would rather have passed unobserved. The thought of Mary's nearness disturbed him, so that he heard nothing of the music for the first half-hour, and scarcely noticed the burst of applause which greeted his own stage picture when the curtain rose. Mary's thoughts about Baretti

were contradictory. She had been longing to see him, and her heart's only food had been to hear of him for months past, and now that he was back again she was angry that he was there to disturb her loyalty to Tom, and to close her ears to Tom's opera.

The subject of the work was the story of Godiva, and Tom was his own poet and playwright, a fact which did not tell greatly in the opera's favour, perhaps. Yet the first performance went well ; the principal performers were called and recalled, one or two movements were redemanded, and at the close the composer received what it is the fashion to call an ovation.

Mr. Bethesda displayed a chastened joy, and Tom ran round to the box in which his goddess sat, and was there congratulated. The girl was going to marry him, and be loyal to him, and the very treason of her own heart made her anxious to be warm and kindly to the lover who had suffered so undeservingly. She thought with

a flush of pride that she would have a man for a husband, and not a male clothes horse, as ninety-nine out of every hundred of the society men she met seemed to be. For she despised the young men of average intellect, who made it a point to veil what wits they had, and she admired with all her heart the men of brains who wrote books and music, and painted pictures and guided the destinies of States. You gave her more delight if you took her where she could change a word with a statesman, a popular writer, or a member of the Forty than she could extract out of a score of dances, though she liked dancing well enough too, and was not indisposed to receive the admiration she met in a ball-room. To-night the whole world present had done homage to her husband who was to be, and the pride and joy in Tom's face was reflected in her own.

Baretti, who had been delayed in leaving the house by the slow stream that crawled idly

out of stalls and balconies, could not refrain from one look in the direction of Lording's box. He knew where Tom had run to after his final bow, and he saw the glance almost of exultation with which the lovely woman held out both hands to welcome him: Lording and Tom, as the fates would have it, caught Barette looking, and they both beckoned him so plainly that he could not pretend to have missed the invitation, and reluctantly made his way round to them. Mary schooled herself to receive him, and there was nothing in her manner or in his to indicate the tremor each felt at the other's presence.

The painter was pale and sad, but he brightened and warmed over his friend's success.

'I told you, Carroll,' he said, 'that there was a need for some man to come to the front in music. And I told you that England would listen when he came.'

‘We shall see,’ Tom answered, brightly. He was as happy as he had ever been. The fortune his father had taken from him so wrongfully might be restored or kept for cousin Mark. He cared nothing for it. With the experience of that night behind him, he felt that he could carve his own way to fortune, and had no need of extraneous help. He was glad that for a time he had been thrown upon himself.

‘You will excuse me now,’ he said. ‘I must not forget my company. I must run round and thank Roselli. He sang magnificently. So did Madame Lavigne. I must say a word to them. May I call for half-an-hour later on? Then, no good-byes at present. Will you come, Baretta?’

He ran down to the green-room, followed by his friend, and the singers there gathered applauded as he entered. Mr. Bethesda was opening champagne for the baptism of Success,

and Tom clinked glasses with a score of people. Everybody congratulated everybody, and the scene was particularly gay and animated.

‘If we go on like this, Bethesda,’ said Tom, as he drew on his gloves and buttoned his overcoat to go, when all this exuberance was over and the room was cleared—‘If we go on like this, Bethesda, we shall make our fortunes.’

‘Well, no, sir,’ returned Bethesda ; ‘we shan’t quite do that, but the thing is evidently going to be much less costly than I feared.’

‘You thought we should lose money on it,’ said Tom, lightly.

‘Well, sir,’ said Bethesda, with his humble and compassionate smile, ‘that’s inevitable, of course, where the house won’t hold enough for the nightly expenses.’

Tom Carroll fairly glared at the smiling manager until his smile faded, and he stood rubbing his hands with an aspect altogether rueful.

‘Is that the case here?’ Tom demanded, after pausing half a minute.

‘I thought that was clearly understood, sir,’ said Bethesda. ‘I laid the figures before you clearly. There has never been such a company got together before in a house like this, and after this night’s reception the thing is safe to go for a while. But if you cram the house every night, we’re just five pounds under the sum of our working expenses. Taking to-night as representative, the loss would be fifteen pounds. The gallery was almost empty.’

‘Call it a loss of a hundred pounds a week, Baretti,’ said the successful composer, turning blankly on his friend. ‘I can’t afford to go on long at that rate.’

‘Call it two hundred a week, sir,’ said Bethesda, mildly. ‘It will be nearer that than the other.’

‘Then we shan’t make our fortunes after all, Bethesda,’ said Tom, recovering himself. ‘Good-night. Come along, Baretti.’

CHAPTER XVII.

THE Signora Caterina was walking along the Strand in a melancholy and despondent mood. She was not so well dressed as it had been her custom to be, not nearly so well dressed as she liked to be. Her finery was naturally all the worse for having been fine, and its showy colours gave signs of having been cleaned too often. Bronzed boots, grey at the toes, soiled lavender gloves mended, a plush coat or mantle creased and threadbare, and a hundred other signs of poverty and decay were noticeable about her. These broad indications of late outrageous finery and present poverty, taken in conjunction with the Signora's silly habit of disfiguring her eyes and eyebrows, gave her an

aspect which was worse than she deserved to wear, though it has been admitted already that she was not a model woman. But there are grades in everything, and she looked many grades lower than she had fallen, or was likely to fall.

She held her head well up, and walked with a certain pride and defiance in her aspect, which made her shabby finery the more remarkable. Men stared at her broadly, women with sidelong glances of aversion drew away from her if she paused at a shop window, and, proud as she looked, the tears were near her eyes pretty often. She was by no means a tearful young woman as a rule, but there are physical conditions which make room for the play of the more mournful emotions. One of these conditions may be brought about by hunger, and the Signora was hungry. The sensation until a day or two ago had been unknown to her. There are millions of people in

the world who have never been hungry in their lives, and she had been amongst them. She had thought herself hungry often enough, and had always owned a fine, healthy appetite, which had made the dinner-hour a pleasant time, so long as it brought dinner with it. But now she knew what hunger meant, and its cruel, yearning nausea burned her, and bit at her, and sickened her, until she could have snarled like a wild animal at the unattainable tempting things to eat displayed in the shop windows.

She had no purpose in being abroad, but it happened that wide London was the only home she owned just then. The Megatherium engagement had long ago come to an end, and no renewal had followed it, nor had any other opening presented itself. She owned the clothes she stood in, and nothing more. Landladies have to live, like other people, and non-paying tenants admit the necessity for their own evic-

tion, except in Ireland. To have been well-fed and well-dressed, and in a way courted and admired, made this destitution and despair the bitterer. There was one man whom she had to thank for it all, and he was the only creature who had ever given her a thought of purity since she had been a little child, though the purity awoke somehow in her own heart, the gift of her own awakened nature, and not his gift at all. There was a way out of hunger even now, and if she had never seen Mark Carroll she would have taken it. People talk of virtue as if it were a fixed quantity; and that, of course, is sad nonsense. This young woman had been reared in a moral slum, and the surroundings into which she was born looked natural to her. Yet when a door opened and she beheld a room swept and garnished she had native virtue enough to like the look of it and to long to dwell there. The pictures which garnished that figurative apart

ment might not be to your taste or to mine, but then you are a connoisseur in virtue, and your trained eye would detect the false colour and the bad drawing, whilst hers looked with worship on the artistic daub. It was Mark Carroll who had seemed to open that door for her, and what she had to give she gave him in reward. It was certainly he who had tried to throw her back into the natal slum, and certainly he who had shut the door in her face, and in proportion as she could have loved him she hated him. The pangs of hunger, the averted glances of women, and the garments drawn aside were all added to Mark Carroll's score, and she was helpless to repay him. Bitter hunger, bitter hate, scorn, despair, self-pity—the Signora's shabby plush mantle covered them all, and her black eyes sometimes failed to cover one or two of them.

To be miserable and homeless and unemployed leads—amongst other things—to a

singular interest in trifles, and the Signora stopped to regard countless objects she had never before cared to look at. With other matters of equal importance to her she looked curiously at the theatrical bills in the windows of Strand public-houses, or at the doors of the theatres themselves. Her knowledge of English was by this time considerable, and she could read with some approach to comfort. One announcement (which attracted her attention neither more nor less than a dozen others she had seen already and had stood to read) set forth that the magnificently successful English opera 'Godiva' would be repeated until further notice. A smaller bill beside it ran thus: 'Garrick Theatre. Sole Lessee and Manager Mr. Bethesda. Godiva, written and composed by Thomas Carroll, Esq.'

She read no further, but stood and stared at the name. That was the man of whose kindness and generosity Baretti had spoken to Tito,

and he was the stupid innocent whom Mark had brought to Tito's chambers on his last visit there. There were not likely to be two Thomas Carrolls who were composers, and she had heard the one she knew of play superbly, and had heard all about him from Baretti. It was perfectly clear that this was Mark's cousin, and his printed name hit her almost as Mark's own would have done.

Whilst she stood looking at the placard somebody touched her in passing, and she on turning round saw Tom Carroll with his hat raised in apology. The placard was at the main entrance to the theatre.

She saw that at first sight he did not recognise her, but she called up as much of a smile as she could, and held out her hand.

‘Good day, Mistare Carroll.’

Tom was chivalrous, and, in some ways, weak-hearted. He could not resist the proffered hand, though he took it reluctantly. Some

men might have thought the woman's recognition insolent, but he was not amongst them.

‘Can you speak a word to me?’ she asked, holding his hand.

Two or three people in the street turned to look at them. The painted woman, with her gorgeous finery all faded and dirty and threadbare, holding the young swell's hand in broad daylight, and looking at him with appealing eyes—the young swell shamefaced at the recognition—the story was plain to anybody who saw the picture.

‘Come inside,’ said Tom, waving his free hand towards the entrance to the theatre.

Fashionable people do occasionally walk eastward along the Strand, and Lording, who made no pretence of being fashionable, passed on the other side at that moment. He naturally looked over at the theatre at which Tom's opera was running, and he saw in the doorway what was to be seen. It looked for all the

world as if Tom had been seized by the woman, and were drawing her indoors to escape observation. Lording walked on and tried to think no more about it, but it rankled in his mind.

‘What can I do for you?’ Tom asked the Signora, when they were once behind the swinging-doors.

She had scarcely meant to appeal to him at all, but her own case was desperate, and perhaps he could give her a chance.

‘I have lose my latest place,’ she answered. ‘I have nothing to do three months. I am quite poor. Will you let me sing in your opera to earn a littel money? You have hear me sing.’

‘I am sorry,’ Tom began, and he saw that the woman’s face fell wofully. The eager, beseeching light faded from her eyes, and the young man had already noticed how fallen away from her old state she was. ‘I’m *afraid*

there's no vacancy.' He was losing money every day, and drawing nearer and nearer to the great gulf of poverty. The opera was running at a heavy loss, though to the uninitiated it looked like a success; and it was only being allowed to run at all lest its immediate withdrawal should blight his future chances with the managerial world. He could ill afford to offer an asylum to anybody just now, and he disliked this woman and had a prejudice against her, a prejudice sufficiently justifiable and reasonable. 'I am very sorry,' he said again.

Now the Signora had never had to stoop to sue before. Only that very morning her landlady had refused longer to harbour her, and in her pride and anger she had disdained to plead for a day's reprieve. There is something in the confession of suffering which seems to render it for the moment less bearable, and her own words, 'I am quite poor,' meant so much

for her, and touched her with such a spasm of pity for herself that at this refusal she began to cry.

‘If I can help you in any other way,’ said Tom, drawing out that too ready purse of his.

‘No, no, no,’ she cried, waving her hand against it. ‘I will work if I can.’ Her English carried her no further. Her emotion tied her tongue.

‘Come this way,’ said the yielding composer. ‘I’ll see if we can find room for you.’ She followed him, drying her eyes and striving to subdue herself to quiet. She despised herself for yielding so, and rebelled against the fortune which had driven her to this appeal. But she was starving, and that for a healthy woman is not a slight thing, and she had a reason for keeping alive as long as she could. Her physical hunger for food was not much stronger than the hunger her heart felt for revenge. How the revenge was ever to come

about she could not guess, but if she could compass it, she would have it, by hook or crook, and at whatever sacrifice.

‘Wait here, if you please,’ said Tom, offering her a chair in a room opening off the auditorium. She took a seat and composed herself, and then, sighting a looking-glass, went to it and arranged her tawdry ribbons to the best advantage, and wiped the smeary paint from her eyelids as well as she could, whilst Tom went in search of the manager and found him.

‘Can we make room for another soprano, Bethesda?’ he began. ‘I know we don’t want one, but another won’t matter much.’

‘That is for your consideration, sir,’ replied Bethesda. ‘The expenses are already heavy.’

‘I know,’ said Tom, taking off his hat to rub his hair, and staring at Bethesda with a vexed countenance. ‘I know. But this is a

woman who—Hang it all! We *can* make room, I suppose?’

‘Certainly, sir, certainly, if you wish it,’ said the manager. He knew nothing of Tom’s concerns. When he had heard the Moores speak of him it had been in connection with that dairy business, and he had been represented as a man of wealth and as having a wealthy father. Mrs. Moore’s view of the elder Carroll’s possessions was exaggerated, and Bethesda had caught it. And besides, a poor man could scarcely afford such a whim as to take a theatre for the performance of an opera which no business-like manager would look at. Tom’s work was in one respect like Shakespeare’s, the smallest part needed an artist to play it, and his stage was full. Business-like managers are not fond of pieces in which there are many people to play leading parts. In Tom’s day one star and a bundle of sticks did for most of the London houses.

‘Well, you’d better see to her,’ said Tom ; ‘I don’t want to be bothered with her again.’ Mr. Bethesda looked vaguely sympathetic. ‘She’s in want of money, I know, and when you’ve agreed on the terms you’d better give her a fortnight’s salary in advance, or something of that sort.’

‘Very good, sir,’ returned Mr. Bethesda, and Tom sat down whilst the manager went to confer with Caterina. When Bethesda, returning, announced her engagement and departure, he left the house and went about the business her appeal had interrupted. His own extravagances began to make him discontented with himself, and he knew that he was sinking fast enough without them. And yet how could he have denied the miserable woman when he saw her tears and all the signs of poverty she bore? Nothing short of the practical experience of a relieving officer could have hardened his heart, or closed his hand whilst

there was anything to give in it. Yet his charities began to worry him, as little sins worry a tender conscience, and there were moments when the financial outlook was almost desperate.

He was not going quite madly with his opera, and he and Baretti had talked over the question of its continuance pretty thoroughly. His plan was to run it as long as he dared, and in the meanwhile to set to work at a second, which upon completion should be produced on another lessee's responsibility. All the critics were in his favour, and after this success of his, he would be treated with more consideration than he had been. He was a good deal mixed with theatrical people now, and everybody was extremely amiable with him. Men who knew about stage affairs were cognisant of his real position at the Garrick, though he never guessed it, and amongst them were some who were willing to pick up a few of the

crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Not a few envied Bethesda, and that good man spoke of his patron as a sort of Cræsus. A moneyed amateur is likely to be popular in theatrical circles, and Tom's amiability, his goodness of heart, his ready sympathy and open hand, made him more than a common favourite. When he remembered how friendly everybody was in his new world, he forgot the rapid wasting of his little fortune, and with everybody's good word secured beforehand his future triumphs looked certain. Cousin Mark would have known better, for a man who encounters every other man as a pretender will be right sometimes.

Talking of cousin Mark—the new heir to Trench House found Trench House a little dull, and the keenest sense of humour in the world, backed by the most relishing sense of triumph, could not stave off a feeling of occasional weariness in the society of Mr. Carroll.

It was a great relief to Mark, therefore, when his uncle one day suggested that a week or two in town might be a change for him. He threw a certain graceful air of reluctance into the little speech in which he accepted the holiday, and he executed a dance in the privacy of his bedchamber at the prospect of liberty. There was certain legal business to be done in town, and Mark's professional knowledge would be useful in it, so thought Mr. Carroll. Mark fancied he could trust his professional knowledge to drag out the proposed fortnight into a month, and he set out in subdued high spirits. From the first day of his adoption of this admirable nephew, Mr. Carroll had bestowed an allowance upon him, and until now Mark had had no chance to spend a penny. As a consequence he was better provided than he had ever been in his life before, and since he had been really hard-up in his time, the possession of money afforded him a joy which is out

of the reach of a man who has never felt poverty. Mark had given up his chambers, and the meagre furniture had been sold at a valuation, so that now he went to a Jermyn Street hotel and bestowed himself comfortably.

The London papers appeared daily on Mr. Carroll's breakfast table, and Mark knew all about Tom's opera and its success. He had seen the advertisements, and had read the criticisms, and he had little doubt that his uncle had done the same, though Tom's name was never mentioned between them. Mark had no objection to his cousin's well-doing so long as it did not interfere with his own, and, as a matter of fact, the more Tom thrived the less likely was his father to be stirred by any sentiment of pity, and the less likely was Tom to be a tax upon his cousin.

‘I never cared much for opera,’ said Mark to himself. ‘But the papers say that the

ballet is a good thing. I'll go and have a look at it.'

So a night or two after his arrival in town Mark made one of a fairly filled house to hear 'Godiva.' For a wonder he was in time for the opening chorus, and there in the centre of the stage semicircle was the Signora Caterina. Mr. Bethesda had not been slow to observe the young woman's personal advantages, and her place was prominent. It was undeniable that she helped the stage picture, whilst as a chorus singer she was useful.

'Tom,' said Mark, inwardly, 'you are indiscreet. You make that Christian duty of mine almost too easy.'

Mark seemed pretty safe in the saddle by this time, but he thought the girths might bear a little tightening.

He cared little for the opera, and fell to reading the bill of the play.

'Eh?' he thought suddenly. 'Bethesda?

Mr. Anthony Bethesda? How many Anthony Bethesdas are there in the world? Not many I should say. "Sole Lessee and Manager, Mr. Anthony Bethesda." Curious.'

The ballet came on just then—a quaint old English morris-dance, not at all to the young man's taste. He preferred the can-can, though even that had lost its novelty; and after watching the figures on the stage for an uninterested five minutes he took his overcoat from the attendant and strolled into the vestibule of the house.

'Bethesda,' he was thinking still. 'Not at all a common name. The man himself.' Mr. Bethesda in person in the vestibule. 'I should know that Christian smile amongst a thousand. How d'ye do, Bethesda?'

'How do you do, sir?' said Mr. Bethesda, with a somewhat blank expression.

'How's the little business over the water, Bethesda?' asked Mark, jauntily. 'And the brethren? How *are* the brethren?'

‘For God’s sake——’ said Bethesda, in a whisper. Mark laughed.

‘All right,’ he said lightly. ‘Where can we go and be quiet for a minute or two? I want to speak to you.’

‘Come into my room, sir,’ said Mr. Bethesda, and Mark followed his lead.

‘What brings you here, old man?’ he asked, familiarly. Mr. Bethesda had taken the precaution to lock the door, and he looked frightened as he faced his visitor. ‘Made your pile, eh? Is the new dodge paying?’

‘Well, I can’t say it is, sir,’ returned Bethesda, whose plump and roseate countenance looked almost meagre on a sudden. ‘I’m as poor as Job, I am indeed. I am only a salaried servant here.’

Mark had taken a seat upon the table, and there dangled his legs at ease, looking at the manager with a waggish eye of mastery. At this declaration he stretched out his walking

cane and tapped a line in the play bill on the door.

‘Sole lessee, Bethesda. Sole lessee. There it is in black and white.’

‘A mere form, sir, I assure you. I’m as poor as Job. I have nothing but my salary to depend upon.’

‘Pooh!’ said Mark. ‘I have inherited a large fortune, Bethesda, and I don’t want to blackmail you any more. Come, you can trust me. If the house isn’t yours, whose is it?’

‘It is taken in my name, sir, but as a matter of fact it’s rented by a person of the name of Carroll, who took it to bring out his own opera.’

‘A person of the name of Carroll, eh?’ said Mark, smilingly. ‘He seems to have mounted it pretty well. Cost a fairish penny, didn’t it, Bethesda?’

‘It is very richly mounted,’ said Mr. Bethesda, who seemed ill at ease.

‘Is it paying?’

‘No,’ said the manager, shaking his head mournfully. ‘Losing. At least a hundred and fifty pounds a week.’

‘Bad for the person of the name of Carroll, eh?’ asked Mark.

‘Wealthy men have whims, sir,’ returned Bethesda. ‘He can afford it.’

‘Ah!’ said Mark, who wore throughout this interview a curious air of enjoyment, which contrasted strongly with the other’s evident discomfort. ‘That makes a difference, doesn’t it? And how *is* the little business over the water?’

‘Gone to pieces,’ said Bethesda mournfully. ‘The biggest *coup* I ever went for was the last, and it smashed me. It was beautifully done, beautifully, and somebody must have turned informer. There were seven boilers,’ sinking his voice to a whisper, and looking round, as if he feared another listener, ‘seven

boilers laid on the quay for five or six weeks for everybody to get used to the look of them. Then they were got aboard and sent down for repair.'

'Sent down?' said Mark. 'Sent down where?'

'Down North generally,' returned Bethesda, with a feeble smile. 'The departure was admirably timed, sir, and the boilers were landed at Cardiff, made over to a safe hand there. They nailed him, however, and it burst both of us. I knew I could rely upon him, and he was honourable to the end. Five years is a light sentence, of course, but some men would have turned Queen's Evidence.'

'What was it?' asked Mark, smilingly.

Mr. Bethesda went through a little pantomime expressive of the smoking of a cigar, and blew an imaginary whiff.

'The best Havanas to be had for love or money. The low trade never paid.'

‘I suppose not. And that burst you, did it?’

‘Like a bubble, sir,’ returned Mr. Bethesda. ‘I suppose that altogether I wasn’t less than five thousand pounds out of pocket by it. But the problem of long interest and short risk has never been satisfactorily solved, and never will be. If you could rely upon everybody’s honesty now.’

‘It’s a pity you can’t do that, Bethesda, isn’t it?’ said Mark, smilingly. ‘And so the person by the name of Carroll is losing a hundred and fifty pounds a week, is he? By the way, Bethesda, who’s that handsome foreign-looking woman in the chorus?’

‘Signora Caterina, sir?’ asked Bethesda, with a look of relief. ‘Is that the lady you mean?’

‘She stands back in the centre of the stage in the first chorus. I thought her rather handsome. Who is she?’

‘That is Signora Caterina,’ said Mr. Bethesda. ‘Mr. Carroll introduced her here, sir. I don’t know anything about her.’

‘A private affair of Mr. Carroll’s, perhaps?’ asked Mark.

‘Well, no, sir, I don’t think so. It may have been in the past, but it isn’t now, I’m certain. No. That isn’t his line, I should say, sir. I confess that at first I thought it might be, for he asked me to get the prettiest girls I could, but he’s never so much as looked at one of them.’

‘How did he come to bring the lady here?’

‘I haven’t a notion, really,’ replied Bethesda. ‘She was awfully shabby — awfully shabby when she came. He gave her a fortnight’s wages in advance.’

Mark nodded smilingly, and looked as if about to put another question, when a knock came to the door, and a second later the handle

was tried. Bethesda ran to the door and unlocked it.

‘Hillo!’ cried Tom Carroll, entering, and looking with amazement from one to the other. ‘Why, Mark, what brings you here?’

‘I ran up to town to see you,’ said Mark, with perfect self-possession. ‘I met Bethesda in the vestibule, and he and I have been having a little talk together. We are old acquaintances. Bethesda is the only client I ever had.’

‘And how are you?’ cried Tom, shaking hands heartily. It may seem singular, but he had no malice for Mark. Such a supposition would have seemed singular indeed to Mark himself. He had thought the matter over pretty often, and he admitted that if their fortunes had been reversed, he would have poisoned Tom if that could have been managed safely. Anybody would, said Mark. It came natural.

He answered Tom’s salute with perfect responsiveness.

‘You’d better see to that latch, by the way, Bethesda,’ said he, with a laugh. ‘If Mr. Carroll had caught you locked in with one of those pretty girls you have here, he wouldn’t believe you’d done it because the latch wouldn’t act, and you only wanted to keep the wind out.’

‘What’s the matter with the latch?’ asked Tom, trying the handle of the door. ‘It’s all right now.’

‘It wasn’t a minute ago,’ said Mark, easily.

‘Who would have thought of your knowing Bethesda,’ said Tom, brightly. ‘What a little world it is, after all! Why, Bethesda, it was only yesterday that you told me you had never met anybody of the name of Carroll, and you and my cousin Mark are closeted here like old chums.’

Mr. Bethesda gave an odd little look at Mark Carroll.

‘I had forgotten the gentleman, sir,’ he

answered, 'until he did me the honour of reminding me of our old connection this evening, sir.'

'Come and have a talk, Tom,' said Mark, thrusting an arm through his cousin's. 'Good night, Bethesda.'

'Good night, sir,' said Bethesda, and stood staring at the doorway through which the two had passed. 'He's a beautiful liar,' he said, a minute later, as he closed the door. 'Very ready and natural. Carroll? Mark Carroll? Now what did *he* want an alias for?'

CHAPTER XVIII.

TOM felt, as he and his cousin walked together after leaving the theatre, that Mark's manner had never seemed half so agreeable or befitting. He did not think this, but he felt it warmly. There was no shyness about Mark, as there would have been about some men in the circumstances, and there was no pretence of there being nothing the matter.

‘Tom,’ said Mark, ‘I want to have a serious talk with you. I want to ask you to answer one question I shall put to you.’

‘I will if I can,’ said Tom, not guessing what the question might be.

‘Then,’ began Mark, stopping short in the street and facing his cousin with a serious brow,

‘is there anything between yourself and your father which is not known to me? Anything more than that row at the Megatherium?’

‘Nothing that I know of,’ Tom answered.
‘Why?’

‘I am obliged to move slowly,’ said Mark, taking his cousin’s arm again, and walking with thoughtful eyes upon the pavement. ‘I dare not appeal to him too often, but I want to see you reconciled, and I mention you when I dare. But lately he has dropped a hint or two of your having offended him in other ways.’

‘In what other ways?’ asked Tom, a little angrily.

‘Well, you see,’ said Mark, musingly, ‘he doesn’t speak straight out, and I don’t want to make him angry by questioning; but so far as I can gather, he has a notion that you’ve been living in rather an immoral way up here.’

‘Who?’ cried Tom, coming to a standstill.
‘I? How?’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Mark, in a propitiatory way, ‘don’t fly out at me. I am only trying to get at the bottom of the thing. Don’t be offended if I go on. Has there ever been or is there now any entanglement between you and——? Come, Tom, I’m not a Joseph myself, and I never professed to be. Is there a lady in the case at all, or has there been?’

‘You might have answered any charge of that sort,’ returned Tom, ‘out of your knowledge of me.’

‘If there is such a charge, there is no truth in it?’

‘Not an atom,’ said Tom, quietly enough.

‘Have you made an enemy?’ asked Mark. ‘Is there anybody with a grudge against you?’

‘Not a soul I know of.’

‘Tom,’ said Mark, suddenly, after a pause, ‘don’t you think you ought to write to the governor and make some approach to him? Don’t answer yet. Don’t you think you might

make allowance for him, and even humiliate yourself a little for his sake?'

'Mark,' said Tom, in answer, in a voice which showed how moved he was, 'if my father had been a poor man I would have gone to him next day, and would have told him that I had not done well in risking his peace of mind to save Miss Moore an inconvenience. But he is a rich man, Mark, and he was as much in the wrong as I was. If he had not refused to believe me, I would have proved my case, since he demanded it. He had a right to demand it, but he had no right to think me a liar. That is a right I never yet gave to any man.'

'Without an advance from you,' said Mark, 'a reconciliation does not look hopeful. He is beginning to think all manner of evil things about you.'

'It's a great pity,' said Tom with a sigh, 'but it can't be helped.' He thought of the difference the last few months had made in his

position and prospects, and his heart sank at it ; but there came the natural revulsion of defiance, and this extended itself to his father. ‘ He must do what he will and think what he will. I must fight my own way in the world. I should be happy in his good opinion ; but, much as I value it, I prefer my own, and I will not lose that at least.’

Mark sighed audibly.

‘ There’s a pair of you,’ he said. ‘ Irreconcilables both.’ To this his cousin returned no answer, and they walked on quietly for a hundred yards or so. ‘ Tom,’ began Mark again, ‘ I give you my word of honour that I feel my own position keenly. Perhaps I am a bit cowardly about myself for one thing. You know how helpless I am in the world. I’m like a child. I never earned a penny in my life.’

‘ You had a client once,’ said Tom.

‘ Yes,’ said Mark, fortunately recalling his statement about Bethesda. ‘ I earned a ten-

pound note once ; but it came to the same thing—I never got it. I am dependent on your father, and since my own governor died, I always have been. Well, you know, you and I have both looked forward to his doing something for me finally, and now he's in such a mood that if I pushed your case too far he'd send me packing after you, and found a hospital. Now that would be good neither for me nor you, and it wouldn't be comfortable for him. And all the time I am in a false position. I am ill thought of in many quarters where I would rather stand well, because people say what a cold-blooded thing it is for a fellow to accept a position which holds father and son apart. They don't know what I am trying to do, and would hardly believe me if I told them. Now, can't you make me your mediator ? Can't I say we met, and that you spoke kindly of him and all that sort of thing, and expressed your sorrow for having troubled him ? '

‘I can do nothing, and say nothing that does not lay me open to suspicion,’ answered Tom. ‘You may tell him what I have said already, if you like. Does he seem to feel the thing much, Mark?’

‘He doesn’t show a great deal,’ Mark answered, ‘but then you know his way.’

Yes, Tom admitted, he knew his father’s way. The future was beginning to look blank to Tom; his money failure in connection with the opera tormented him, and his ideas seemed to have run dry, so that he made no progress to speak of with opera number two. His troubles were closing fast upon him, and all the lesser troubles he endured drove him towards one much greater. His love affair looked especially hopeless, and that was the one thing he could least endure not to hope about. It seemed as if to take his hope of that were to take all, and the more he thought of it the less possible it seemed to marry and become a pensioner on

Lording's bounty. It is probable enough that, like many other people, he made most of his own troubles for himself, but home-made troubles are no more savoury than those of foreign manufacture, and the lad's mild gorge rose at them.

'I say,' quoth Mark, rather suddenly, 'is that your own speculation, Tom—that theatre?'

'Yes,' said Tom, with no great sprightliness of tone.

'Is it paying?'

'Losing fast.'

'Shall you drop it?'

'I dare not—at least not just yet.'

'It seems to me, Tom, that unless your governor relents, you are in a bad way.'

'A very bad way indeed, Mark; but not so bad a way that it may not be mended.'

'You must let me say something to your father. Give me a message to him.'

'No. You are a good fellow, Mark, but that affair must take its course. I can't beg

for a right as a favour. I didn't deserve to be thrown over, and I can't ask to be taken back again.'

This talk brought them to Tom's door. Mark declined to enter just then.

'Think it over, Tom. I've said what I wanted to say. Think it over. I'll call to-morrow at mid-day, if that will suit you. Good-night, old man.'

He wrung Tom's hand hard and walked away hurriedly.

'He's a good fellow, is Mark,' said Tom to himself, standing on the doorstep and looking after his cousin's retreating figure. 'A good fellow.'

'An odd thing,' said Mark, falling into a saunter as he turned the corner into that street in which he had first met the charming Signora. 'A curious thing, how being in the fashion makes one fond of the fashion. Since I took to having respectable motives it is wonderful to

notice what a hold they've taken on me. I shall end in believing myself like the rest of them. We're poor creatures—all frail alike,' concluded Mark, with a laugh to himself. 'All frail alike.'

As he walked down the street thinking, he passed a solitary passenger, who looked keenly at him and quickened his step a little, as if to keep pace with him for a moment and make sure of him. This solitary passenger was Signor Malfi.

'You are still in London, my friend,' said the Signor silently, when he was sure of him. 'Let me see where you live.'

He followed, but not for any great distance, for at the end of the street a voice he knew hailed Mark Carroll by name, and the Signor crossed the street in the darkness to avoid his countryman, Baretti.

'You are back in London?' said Baretti. 'Have you seen your cousin?'

‘I have just left him,’ returned Mark. ‘You have some influence with him. Beg him to follow my advice. It is the only way to a reconciliation with his father.’

‘What is your advice?’ asked Baretti.

‘That he should seek the reconciliation,’ returned Mark. ‘That he should make the first advances.’

‘Do you think the advances likely to be accepted?’ asked Baretti.

‘I think it well worth while to try. I’ve told Tom so, but he’s pig-headed.’

‘I am anxious to serve him if I can,’ said the painter. ‘Shall I walk with you whilst you tell me what to do?’

Mark accepted this offer, and the two went on together arm in arm. Signor Malfi, who had been standing in the darkness fifty yards farther down the street, walked leisurely until they passed him, and then followed.

‘You have met my uncle and have seen

enough of him to know how unlikely it is that any advance should come from him. He is a man of prodigious firmness—not to say obstinacy—but one of the kindest-hearted men in the world. Tom must pocket his pride and make submission.’ Barette nodded here and there as Mark talked, and the disinterested cousin grew warm with his theme.

‘Take no notice of the thing now,’ said Barette, breaking in on the current of Mark’s speech. ‘But do you know why you are being followed?’

‘Followed?’ asked Mark, quietly. ‘What do you mean? Why should I be followed.’

‘There is a friend of mine behind us,’ said the painter, ‘who has a grievance against you. He was behind you when I met you, but thinking that I did not see him, he crossed the road and waited. Now he is coming on again.’

‘A friend of yours who has a grudge

against me?' asked Mark. 'And who may that be?'

'Count twenty paces beyond the next lamp,' said Baretti. 'Then turn, and you will have him in the light.'

So said, so done. Mark knew well enough of whom Baretti spoke, and was not surprised at being followed, though the sensation he experienced was far from being comfortable. He and Baretti wheeled round suddenly at the point agreed upon, and Signor Malfi came to a dead stop for a second or so, and then walked on towards them. Mark stood on the alert, waiting for what might happen. He had not long to wait, for Malfi cut right at his face with the walking-cane he carried. Mark warded the blow with his own cane, but before he could return it, Baretti had got in between them, and for a minute or two the painter and the singer made a great hubbub with expostulation on the one side and execration on the other.

Mark kept quiet and watched, cool and wary. To have a quarrel with Signor Malfi would not suit him at all, for he was severely moral at Trench House, and enjoyed a reputation for another and more genial sort of morality—unstarched, but unsmirched—in its neighbourhood; and the revelations which might come of a fracas with the popular tenor would militate against his reputation. On the other side, Malfi cared little for the prospect of á bout at fisticuffs, and repented his flush of passion already. So with both unwilling to fight, the promised battle was postponed, but the assailant cursed from behind Baretti with Italian fluency, and let out all the story. This was, of course, unpleasant for Mark, who had tried to make something of a cat's paw of his cousin in this matter, and who knew that the story would go from Baretti to Tom. Even such a fool as Tom might scarcely like to have been used as a blind in such an affair, and for the present it

was part of Mark's plan that Tom should think well of him.

‘I have no appetite for a street brawl,’ said Mark, in English, ‘and the man is mad with groundless jealousy.’

‘What does he say?’ cried Malfi, with an energetic pretence of a desire to get past Baretti. Baretti, still keeping between him and Mark, translated, and the singer broke out with a new tirade. One foot-passenger paused long enough to hear all three speaking Italian, and, being in his own way a humourist, cried ‘Go it, Frenchy!’ in a highly-exhilarated way.

‘We shall have a crowd here in a moment,’ said Mark, in an undertone, to Baretti. ‘I shall walk on until I meet a policeman, and if your friend follows me I shall give him in charge.’

So saying, he turned his back upon the two, and marched along, indifferent enough to outer seeming, but carrying his heart in his ears.

‘You call yourself my friend,’ said Malfi, hotly, ‘and you consort with that dog.’

‘I consort with that dog for a purpose,’ said Baretti, ‘and I still call myself your friend. I must not lose him now. Let me follow him. Come to me to-morrow. What can you gain by a disturbance in the streets? I may help you to right your wrong in a way you do not dream of. Come to me to-morrow.’

Malfi made no answer, but he allowed Baretti to follow Mark, and only stood still to watch the two retreating figures until the night swallowed both of them. Then he shook his stick in the air, spat on the pavement, and went his way. The painter came up with Mark at a run, and Mark, having assured himself that it was Baretti, and not Malfi, who pursued him, sauntered slowly to be the more readily overtaken.

‘Thank you,’ he said, when Baretti came alongside, ‘I am very much obliged. About Tom, Signor Baretti; will you try and per-

suade him to make some approaches to his father?’

‘I will advise him for the best,’ said Baretti. ‘It is a pity that so excellent a son and so kind a father should be divorced from each other.’

‘Isn’t it?’ said Mark, with an assent almost tender in its fervour.

‘It is a pity, too,’ observed Baretti, ‘that my poor friend Malfi should be divided from his wife by so groundless a suspicion. So far as you are concerned she is innocent?’

‘The man’s a madman, pure and simple,’ said Mark, tranquilly. ‘I think the woman took a fancy to me, but that wasn’t my fault. Ask my cousin Tom. He’ll tell you that I asked him to sit out an Italian lesson I was giving her, to prevent her from making eyes at me.’ It was not easy to suspect so perfect a tactician.

‘This is not the first I have heard of it,’

said Barette, who also knew how to be candid. 'Malfi told me the whole story. He said then what he repeated to-night, that he had tracked her to your chambers.'

'She was fool enough to come there,' Mark returned. 'That was not my affair either. Whilst she was there Malfi turned up, and I hid her. When he had gone away, I told her I couldn't stand that sort of nonsense, and that if it occurred again, I should have to take unpleasant measures. You read the English poets, Mr. Barette, and you remember the line "Hell has no fury like a woman scorned." The beautiful Signora Malfi is the best illustration of that statement I have yet encountered. I'm not a Joseph myself,' said Mark, for the second time that day. 'But in this case I'm a martyr.'

Mark's candour was his best weapon, but he could not quite kill Barette's doubts of him.

'You disliked the woman?' the painter asked. 'That is why you wished your cousin

to go with you when you gave her the lesson you speak of?’

‘Well, not exactly that,’ said Mark, with a light-hearted laugh. ‘But the game didn’t seem worth the candle, and besides that, Malfi was a friend in a sort of a way, and there is honour, you know, even amongst gentlemen.’

Baretti walked thoughtfully on and said nothing. The man made no pretence to be better than he was, and his easy cynicism made him ten times more readily believable than any moral profession could have done. And yet Baretti was not easy in his mind about him, and to doubt him on one point was to doubt him on all. Half unconsciously he did doubt him on all points, and he began to have vague ideas that it was here if ever that his chance of being useful to Tom Carroll would arise. As if there were not real dragons enough about his friend’s path already, he was in the mood to create fancy dragons for the pleasure of

killing them, and circumstances had given Mark so much influence over his cousin's life that Baretti was nine-tenths jealous of him. Now that he had come to think of it, he was persuaded that he had never heartily liked Mark Carroll from the first, and a spice of that discontent which Mark confessed would have been natural in Tom began to flavour Baretti's fancies. What guarantee in the world was there that Mark should play fair with Tom? And what would the world think fairer play than to let things take their course? But if Mark allowed events to run on unguided it was likely that he and not Tom would inherit the Trench House estates. It began to be unbelievable, as Baretti considered these things, that any man would take the trouble to shake his own standing-ground unless he had a very strong reason for it—some passion of honour, or gratitude, or love. Now, not to be unduly suspicious, it did

not seem likely that Mark Carroll was a man to nurse so fine a sense of honour as his present pretensions claimed for him, and, so far as the painter knew, he had no great call either to love or to gratitude.

Baretti had spoken all these half-proved fancies about Mark in his last words to Malfi, when he had said that he might help to right his countryman's wrongs in a way the other did not dream of. If Mark were pretending to serve Tom's interest while he played against him, there were not many revenges to which Baretti would not have thought it dignified to stoop.

'You are naturally anxious about your cousin,' he said at last, 'and I am naturally anxious about my countryman. Whilst you try to reconcile father and son, I must try to reconcile husband and wife. Do you know that the lady is singing in your cousin's opera?'

'Yes,' said Mark, since there was nothing

to be got by ignorance. 'I saw her there this evening.'

'Did you speak to her?'

'No. I only saw her on the stage. Why the deuce *should* I speak to her?'

'People are very stupid,' said Baretti, leaving Mark's query unanswered. 'They quarrel without cause, and they give themselves and their friends a great deal of needless trouble. I will speak to your cousin, Mr. Carroll, and I will do my best for him. Good night.'

'Good night,' said Mark, in a voice which responded sympathetically to the weariness in Baretti's. 'It's a poor world, Mr. Baretti, and one's best resource is not to care for it very much.' He gripped the Italian's hand, said 'Good night' again, and walked towards his hotel. That unexpected disturbance with Malfi had been got out of well enough, and Mark was grateful to his own good fortune. But to have that sort of thing happening at odd times

would be unpleasant, if at last the coward's passion did not make him dangerous. Mark was certain of Malfi's cowardice, but counted on no immunity from danger on that score ; for he had had opportunities of studying the dirty side of human nature in the assize courts, and he knew of what base metal homicides are made.

But, apart from fears so tragic—and Mark was no coward—to have a man of that sort about, ready at any time to knock one's respectability to pieces was eminently undesirable, and yet to be rid of him seemed impossible. He could be dodged and evaded at times, no doubt, but then there was no certainty as to the time or place of his appearance.

Mark's cogitation on this matter bore fruit. It is noticeable that people out of one country neighbourhood often use the same town hotel, and would think it rather an unfitting thing to go to any other. It happened that Mark

met in the Jermyn Street house two country youngsters with whom he had acquaintance at Overhill, and in his own bright, open-hearted way he fell talking about his cousin Tom. Of course all the county knew of the quarrel between father and son, and there was no breach of family confidence in speaking of it.

‘He’s as obstinate,’ said Mark, good-humouredly, ‘as a donkey, and he won’t even ask his governor to come round. He’s going the pace, too, up here, I can tell you. He’s a thundering clever fellow, mind you, and you should go and hear that opera of his—the music’s magnificent. But,’ continued Mark, with the laugh of a man who makes allowances, ‘he has kicked over the traces fairly now, and everybody who knows his game is a little sorry for it. They say Byron kept a harem, but it wasn’t in London, and he didn’t hire a stage to show his beautiful Circassians to the British public. Of course, that sort of thing is no man’s business but his

own, but I'm very sorry for it. Don't you fellows breathe a word of this down at home. You won't, will you? It would ruin him with the old fellow for ever and ever.'

Of course, the young men promised the most profound discretion.

'He got *me* into a bit of a mess a night or two ago,' said Mark, laughing genially. 'There's an Italian fellow, a tenor at the opera—Tom's a good deal mixed up with the opera people—and this fellow's wife took a fancy to Tom, and made a dead set at him. She's singing in "Godiva" now, and has run away from her husband and attached herself to my charming cousin's fortunes. It's a bit awkward for me, for the operatic tenor had me pointed out as the man, and came at me with a thick stick. I don't suppose that Tom took any share in that business. He wouldn't let another fellow into a scrape of that kind knowingly. But if Tom's wild oat harvest answers to his sowing,

I can prophesy a devil of a crop for him. Now, for heaven's sake, don't you fellows speak a word of this at home. I know I can trust your honour, or I wouldn't have spoken.'

They promised faithfully, and went away to trust other people's honour, as Mark knew they would.

CHAPTER XIX.

MALFI did not call upon Baretti on the morrow. Perhaps he thought little of his countryman's promise of vengeance, and perhaps he was somewhat ashamed of his own ignominious bluster. But when he did call, the artist had something to say which interested him. Mark Carroll was a very clever young man, beyond a doubt, but even he was unable to count beforehand upon everything. He had naturally counted on his latest story reaching Lording's ears in one form or another, but he had not counted on the mode of Lording's reception of it. It set the old boy off as a spark starts a rocket, and he went at Tom to know the truth or falsehood of it, without an hour's delay. He

found him in a dressing-gown, with a cigar in his mouth, a glass of brandy and soda on the table before him, and a disorderly litter of musical manuscripts all about the room. Now Lording could not tell of his own intuition that Tom had been at work all night, and the lad's worn aspect and the brandy and soda taken in conjunction looked bad to the old fellow's eyes.

Tom held out his hand, but, to his consternation, Lording declined to take it, and set himself firmly upon the hearthrug, with his hat in one hand and his walking-stick in the other.

‘Tom Carroll,’ said the old boy, ‘I never do anything by halves, and I won’t shake hands by halves. I won’t condemn you unheard, and you shall have your say fairly and fully. What’s the meaning of these scandals about you and the women at your theatre?’

‘What scandals, sir?’ asked Tom.

‘All sorts of scandals, sir!’ cried Lording.

‘Do you mean to say you don’t know of them?’

‘I have never heard of any,’ Tom returned.

‘By gad, sir!’ said Lording, ‘they say the place is a harem, and that you’re the sultan of it. Orgies! I don’t know what all.’

‘Who says so?’ asked Tom, beginning to look dangerous.

‘It’s a matter of general talk,’ said Lording. ‘The county’s ringing with it.’

The youngster heaved a great sigh and threw his hands abroad.

‘So far as I know,’ he replied, ‘the house is as orderly as any in London. I believe it is.’

His momentary anger faded. He was out of spirits, and broken with overwork and anxieties and continuous heartache, and he scarcely cared just then for anything.

‘You believe it is?’ said Lording, half in grief and half in rage. ‘I don’t want an answer

like that. What do you know about this? Come, Tom, my lad, I've loved you like a son, and we stand in such a position that I've a right to ask you.'

'The whole thing is a wicked invention,' Tom answered, drearily. 'Though why anybody should go about to invent a story of that sort against me, I can't guess.'

'Nor I either,' said Lording. 'Tom, you must let me get to the bottom of this. I must be able to contradict it, and I must be able to trace it to its source.'

'Will you pursue your inquiries unhampered by me, sir?' asked Tom. 'Will you make inquiries at the theatre, or cause inquiries to be made? I am a little tired of being suspected, and lied about, and disbelieved. By heaven!' he cried, suddenly, 'I would be ashamed to ask a man of the truth or falsehood of a lie so palpable if I had known him a hundredth part as well as you know me.'

‘Tom,’ said Lording, ‘I am not to blame. I have a duty to perform—and so have you, for that matter. If these shameless charges are made against you, you must fight them. People are putting two and two together. They say your father had fuller reasons for throwing you over than were ever given to anybody.’

‘My father behaved to me, sir,’ said Tom, coldly, ‘as no father had a right to behave to a son. All the rights are not on the father’s side, and all the duties on the son’s. If people are saying that, it is his business to contradict it, not mine.’

‘Yes, yes, Tom,’ said Lording; ‘your business as well as his. You must avoid the appearance of evil.’

‘Into what appearance of evil have I fallen?’ Tom demanded.

‘My lad,’ said Lording, who exercised wonderful patience, all things considered, ‘you

fall into a terrible appearance of evil if you refuse to contradict things like these.'

'They will die of themselves,' said Tom. 'I shall never die of them.'

'Well,' said Lording, with something of an effort, 'you'll tell me on your honour that there isn't one word of truth in this scandal, and I'll believe you against the world.'

'Thank you,' said Tom. 'On my honour as a gentleman there is not one word of truth in it.'

'Very well,' said Lording; 'the libel's done with—dead so far as I'm concerned. Now, who invented it? Who set it going? Is there anybody who has a grudge against you?'

Tom shook his head. 'Not a soul I know of.'

'You made a mistake before in refusing to defend yourself,' said Lording, who was doing his hardest to be loyal. 'You must track this down, Tom. You must hunt it down. You must clear yourself. And until you've done

that, Tom—I don't feel happy in saying it, my lad—but until you've done it, I think you'd better not——'

'I understand you,' said Tom, not without a little bitterness.

'Don't think me harsh, or unfriendly, Tom,' said Lording, taking up the walking-stick and hat which he had only just laid down. 'I can't help it. I'm very sorry, indeed; very sorry.'

'You have your duty to do, sir,' said the youngster, as manfully as he could.

'And you have yours,' returned Lording. 'Track the scandal down.'

In the natural anger of his heart, Tom made a rejoinder for which he was sorry many a time afterwards.

'I have opportunities,' he said. 'My friends give me plenty of elbow-room.'

'Tom Carroll,' said the old boy, with a paler face, 'you have no right to say that sort

of thing to me. I'm not the man to charge with giving a friend elbow-room when he's in trouble. I have accepted your word, and I believe this thing to be an abominable scandal. But it lies on you to clear yourself. All the help I can give you, you shall have; but I can't have a stain brought into the house my daughter lives in. Clear yourself. You can do it.'

'How?' asked Tom, with unwonted passion. 'Where am I to bring my charge? Give me the name of the man who told you the story?'

'The story's in the air,' said Lording. 'It's at every club in London, more or less. There's scarcely a house in which it isn't talked about.'

'And I am to fight this impalpable libel? Not I!' he cried, in a heat of anger and despite. 'I will tell you this, sir—there never was a man against whom this shameful charge would have been less true. You tell me you

believe my word ; but you don't believe me. You ask me to defend myself. I will defend myself when I am charged, but not before. How *can* I defend myself against the blackguards who throw the mud of their own hearts at me in the dark? Defence! What defence has a man in such a case, except in the contempt he feels for his assailants?'

This speech was a little incoherent ; but then righteous anger is just as likely to be incoherent as unrighteous anger, and when Tom let himself loose he began to feel well-nigh mad with rage and grief. That he of all men should be charged with wallowing in that hog-pen of sensual nastiness ! The thought half choked him. One cruel and false estimate of him had robbed him and his love, and now a lie as wicked as was ever coined was circulating from hand to hand with his figure stamped on it as a beast's, to make him odious in all good men's eyes.

‘If you have any pretensions to my daughter’s hand,’ said Lording, ‘your own hands must be clean; and they must not only be clean, but men must know that they are clean. You can go out and track the story if you like. Almost anybody will tell it to you, or a part of it. I’m only just and fair to my own child—not cruel or unreasonable with you. Before you come to us again set yourself straight about this matter.’

‘We had better say goodbye at once, sir,’ Tom answered. ‘There can be no service in delay.’

‘Very well,’ said the old fellow, sorrowfully. He had no doubt that Tom was maligned, or he tried to believe that he had none, and he was grieved to the heart at the whole business. But his soul revolted at the thought of Mary’s name being coupled with such a story, and he could do no other than he had done. ‘Clear yourself and come to me again,’ he said, at the

door, 'and you'll find me what I've always been.'

'Thank you,' said Tom, coldly.

'Tom,' said Lording, turning for a last effort, 'this lofty way of yours brought about the quarrel with your father. People who know you will accept your word, perhaps; but your friends have a right to ask more of you than a bare denial. You haven't the right to grieve us all in this way.' He paused, but received no answer. 'Think it over, my lad,' said Lording, in a voice which began to be untrustworthy, 'and you'll see things as I do. Goodbye, my lad. There's no malice or disbelief in my mind, but I can't help myself. Goodbye, Tom.'

'Good day, sir,' said Tom, as coldly as before; and Lording, with a wistful look, went out.

Tom sat down at the table and began to push about the disorderly manuscripts upon it,

but he could not distinguish one sheet from another, and in a while he arose and walked with irregular and disordered steps about the room. The tears of rage and shame and misery were hot in his eyes, but he fought them back and would not yield to them.

Whilst he was still in this unhappy state, Baretti came down in his velvet sacque, and his gay cap and slippers. His face beamed, and he entered the room with a fantastic step.

‘Carroll,’ he began, ‘I have an inspiration. It is on canvas already. Come and look at it.’ Then he caught sight of Tom’s wild face and ran towards him. ‘What is the matter? You are ill. What is it? Sit down, Carroll, sit down.’

‘Damn the whole base world!’ cried Tom, flinging himself out of Baretti’s hands. ‘Curse the foul-hearted, foul-mouthed hounds that fill it!’

‘Carroll,’ cried the painter, ‘what is it?’

He had never seen his friend enraged before, and the youngster's aspect, commonly so bland and gentle, was frightfully altered now. His voice was hoarse with passion, his face was deadly pale and hard, and his eyes glared like a madman's. He was nearer the boundary line between madness and sanity at that moment than any man can go with safety. He felt it, and trembled for himself, and the tremour saved him. He leashed himself by one tremendous effort, and sat down in a quiet more terrible than his momentary violence. Barette, alarmed by his aspect and the wildness of his words, and fearing to disturb him anew, kept silence for a time. Then he ventured once more to lay a hand upon his friend's shoulder, and said once more, in a voice as gentle as a woman's, 'Carroll—my friend—dearest of my friends—what is it?'

Tom dropped his face into his hands, and a scalding tear or two had way in spite of him.

He looked up with the moisture still glistening in his wild eyes.

‘Go now, Baretti,’ he said, with a great effort. ‘Come in half an hour. I can’t talk now.’ He waved Baretti away with a gesture of such mingled entreaty and command that the painter lingeringly retired, and went slowly up the stairs to his own room. Tom could hear him pacing to and fro, and, sore and bitter as he was, he found some comfort in his friend’s nearness, and the certainty of his sympathy. In a minute or two at the most he began to recover his lost mastery of himself, and having bathed and dressed, he sat down to await Baretti. When the little man came he saw the change in his friend’s appearance and augured well of it, and Tom justified the augury, for he broke down no more, but told the story of Lording’s visit with a calm almost judicial. Baretti, indeed, displayed the more emotion of the two, though he was careful—in the memory

of Tom's late outbreak—to repress himself for his friend's sake.

There was a struggle in Baretti's heart the rage of which would not be easy to exaggerate in words. For if gratitude were a passion with him, his love for his friend's sweetheart none the less fought for unrivalled domination, and the hopes and joys that sprang up anew within him at this story were terrible in the fierce light of his own scorn and hatred of them, and the passion of his self-contempt. The manhood in him won the day, as it had done before, but the conflict left him shaken and hysterical.

‘My cousin Mark,’ said Tom, when he had told the story, ‘gave me an inkling of some such charge against me.’

‘Your cousin Mark,’ said Baretti, with curious quiet, ‘is a very astute person, and he plays his game very well.’

‘What does this mean,’ inquired Tom.

‘It means,’ says Baretti, ‘that I suspect your cousin Mark to be the man who sets this story afoot. Listen, Carroll. Whose turn will this tale serve? Your cousin Mark’s! Who is the one man in all the world who finds it to his interest to throw a cloud about your character? Your cousin Mark! Now listen. Speak if you like when I have done. Is it a common characteristic of mankind to be so self-sacrificing as to throw over a fortune like your father’s for a scruple of honour? Would not most men throw over the scruple for the fortune? And has not this fine cousin Mark of yours protested a little overmuch? And did you ever know him as a self-sacrificing man?’

‘He never had a chance to be,’ said Tom; ‘he was always hard-up, poor Mark. You’re wrong, Baretti. Mark’s too open for such a dastardly course as that, but he always pretended to be a cynic, and some people believed him.’

‘I have reason for distrusting him,’ said Baretti. ‘He was trying to make a stalking horse of you in that affair of Malfi’s. You believe his innocence in that? I know him to be guilty. Signora Malfi confessed her perfidy to her husband, and defied him.’

‘He was not her husband,’ said Tom.

‘Of that I know nothing,’ said Baretti, coolly. ‘And it is not material to the case. My argument is that he proclaimed his innocence to you, and that he was guilty, and that he used you and meant to use you as a screen. And I maintain that a man of whom that is true will stop at nothing. What? He abused your confidence and friendship to profit by them in an intrigue, and he will not abuse them to gain a fortune? Carroll, the truth is as plain as the sun that shines in heaven. You told me that you found him locked in with Bethesda at the theatre’—Baretti was ready to

take anything to throw at Mark—‘What did that mean?’

Tom, on the other side, was willing to attack the weaker portions of Baretti’s argument, and to leave the stronger parts untouched. A boar or tiger when wounded will charge at anything, but a gentleman is another sort of animal, and he was no more disposed to be suspicious of cousin Mark now than he would have been if this base libel had never hurt him.

‘It meant nothing,’ he answered. ‘They locked the door because the ordinary latch didn’t act. That was all.’ These side suspicions weakened Baretti’s case instead of strengthening it. It is always a good rule in criminal proceedings to charge no more than you can prove.

At this instant their talk found an unexpected diversion. They had already heard a ring at the front door, but had scarcely noticed it, and now, with a hurried knock, and no

waiting for a response, in burst Lording, with a red face and panting breath, waving a newspaper in his hand.

‘Have you told Mr. Baretti about this matter?’ he asked. Tom nodded a surprised assent. ‘Then I can speak at once. You asked me just now what you were to fight. Fight that.’ And he flung the newspaper on the table. ‘It’s a low rag, I know, but you can wipe your hands on it as well as if it were the “Times” itself.’

Tom took up the journal and looked at it. He knew it at a glance, for its name was commonly cried by hawkers about the streets, and he had heard it spoken of once or twice at the clubs and elsewhere as a sort of journalistic sewer. Civilisation, amongst other curious matter, has given us this particular joy. The liberty of the press is a glorious thing, and with a great price bought our ancestors this freedom, but in this mixed world no blessing is unmixed.

You may buy now-a-days the pure milk of the word, or, 'turkey stuffed with truffles gay,' if the dish suit you, and you may have either served in gold and silver, but the human porker likes his cabbage-stalk served in a gutter, and he gets it, seasoned to taste.

There was no difficulty in finding the paragraph Lording had come to show, for the old boy had marked it round with a quill pen in something of a triumphant rage, if the look of the heavy lines could be trusted. Tom read it with a sense of rising indignation and disgust. It was written with 'a high pretence of moral tone, and that was only natural, for the British porker, unlike his French brother, prefers an almost religious seasoning with his garbage. A moral tone can make even cabbage-stalks respectable, and they eat the better for respectability, delicious as they are without it.

'You'll fight that?' asked Lording, still breathing hard with haste.

‘Yes,’ said Tom, with a pugnacious look which was strange to him. ‘I think I’ll fight it. I am much obliged to you for bringing it.’

‘This brings the thing to a head, you see,’ said Lording, ‘and I am glad I chanced upon it.’

‘So am I,’ said Tom. ‘Heartily glad.’

‘You’d better come to my lawyer,’ said Lording. ‘This isn’t in his line, but he’ll tell us the best man to go to, and we must begin at once.’

They walked out and took a cab together, leaving Baretti at home. In less than half an hour they were closeted together with a shrewd criminal lawyer, and in ten minutes he knew as much of the case as he wanted to know at that stage.

‘We prove publication to begin with,’ said the lawyer, ‘and will do that at once.’ He rang his bell. ‘Go to that address, Mr. Wilder, and purchase a copy of “The Way of the

World." You may point out this paragraph, and may say that a libel suit will be based upon it.'

The clerk retired, and with another word or two the lawyer bowed out his visitors, and was deep in a fresh case in five minutes. Lord-ing, having begun to fight on Tom's side, was disposed to go with him heart and soul, but there was one thing which weighed against the youngster. He spoke of it at last, though with reluctance.

'Tom,' he said, as they walked towards Montague Gardens together, 'I want to ask a question. I passed by the Garrick Theatre the other morning—it's a week or two ago now—and I saw a young woman hanging on to you in the street at the main entrance. I didn't like the look of it, and it made me readier to receive these stories than I should have been if I hadn't seen it. Now tell me, what was it?'

'I would rather not tell you yet,' said Tom,

to Lording's indignation, but the old boy's feelings were a little calmed by what followed. 'She is singing at the Garrick, and her name is Signora Malfi. If you will ask Baretti about her, he can tell you something, and I will fill in the rest.'

Mark's scheme, ably as it had been built up, began to look shaky. Baretti told his story in answer to Lording's inquiry, and did more. He let loose his suspicions of Mark Carroll, and a seed or two of them fell in Lording's mind and took growth there. It was not easy for an open and generous nature like Lording's to give nutriment to a belief in a villany so shameless in any man he had familiarly known. He struggled against his conviction, if but feebly.

'No, no, Mr. Baretti, Mark isn't so bad as that. He *wanted* to put Tom straight with his father. He begged me to go down to him at once and mediate with him. I went down,' said Lording, rubbing his head with a rueful

look, 'and, like an old fool, I had a row with him, and made things worse than ever.'

'Mr. Mark Carroll is a very astute young man indeed,' said Baretti, with a smile which was not altogether pretty to look at.

'Why,' cried Lording, glaring at him, 'do you think he sent me down on purpose to have a row with his uncle?'

'Mr. Carroll,' said the painter, 'is the last man in the world with whose domestic concerns I should be inclined to meddle. His son and his friend will forgive me if I say that Mr. Carroll's sense of his own dignity is a little exaggerated. Mr. Lording will forgive me if I say that his own warm temper and impetuous good-heartedness make him the last man in the world to send to Mr. Carroll on such a message at such a moment. And Mr. Mark may or may not forgive me if I say that he reckoned on that, and played his game with the cunning I gave him credit for.'

‘Pooh!’ said Lording, feebly; but he was evidently confounded by Baretti’s suspicion, and had no heart to make a fight against it.

‘Mr. Mark Carroll’s anxiety to be rid of his uncle’s fortune is a little too pressing to my mind,’ said the painter.

Everybody knows how easy it is to believe a thing by mere dint of talking about it, and by this time Baretti was confident of the truth of his suspicions, and saw the ground more and more plainly at his feet, and felt his steps more certain every minute. Lording began to share his doubts, and even Tom’s belief in Mark was somewhat shaken.

‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do,’ said Lording, at last. ‘I’ll go and see Mark, and have a talk with him about it.’

‘And get angry with him in five minutes,’ said Baretti, with a laugh, to make the thing less biting, ‘and tell him the truth about himself, and put him on his guard. Forgive me, Mr. Lording. Let me go.’

‘I *am* a little hot-tempered, I’m afraid,’ said Lording, sorrowfully. ‘I fly out at things. I’m not fit to meddle with these matters, but if I promise that I’ll hold my tongue will you take me with you, and let me judge him for myself?’

Baretti could scarcely refuse this, and in effect they set out for Mark’s hotel, and found the young man there in a state of warm indignation at the libellous paragraph, which had been put into his hand by a friend.

‘Tom will prosecute for libel?’ he asked.

‘He has taken proceedings already,’ said Baretti.

‘Right!’ cried Mark, warmly, ‘I wish I were free to act for him, but my fear of losing my influence over his father ties my hands, and I can’t do it. Will he institute a criminal prosecution, or go for damages? It’s not of much use to go for damages, though, against a rag like that,’ scornfully indicating the journal, which lay upon the table of his room.

Lording looked at Baretti meaningly. Everything seemed open and above board about Mark. It was scarcely believable that a man could speak as he did and not mean it.

‘How does Tom take it?’ Mark asked. ‘I was going up to see him when you called. I leave town to-morrow, and he ought to be assured at once of the confidence and sympathy of all his friends. There ought to be a cat-o’-nine-tails for that sort of fellow,’ waving his hand again towards the journal. There was some truth in Mark’s anger at the newspaper. The libellous paragraph gave Tom a chance to come forward with a contradiction so complete that it might excite even his father’s sympathy for the undeserved shames he had endured. ‘The filthy scandal-mongers!’ cried Mark, aloud, with an air of rage. ‘The babbling idiots!’ he added, inwardly. ‘How could I reckon on their stepping in to spoil my game?’

‘Well,’ said Lording, when Mark had run

upstairs to his bedroom for hat and gloves,
'what do you think of him? Doesn't he look
honest enough?'

'He plays well,' said Baretti. 'Wait and
see.'

CHAPTER XX.

THE preliminary proceedings made Tom Carroll famous. They did more. They filled the Garrick Theatre night after night with an audience eager to see the ladies who were the subject of so engaging a scandal. If the lessee's arrangements had been less extravagantly made 'Godiva' might have been worth money to him ; but as things were, the inevitable, unavoidable loss went on, delayed or hastened by fluctuations, but continuous. Tom and Baretti had talked the thing thoroughly over, and had come to the conclusion that to attempt to lessen the expenses by discharging the famous artists who performed in the opera and engaging less famous and less able singers in

their place would be suicidal. To spend now and to go on spending in reason so long as the public cared to fill the house seemed wise to both of them, because Tom would have it that all the money thus thrown broadcast was seed for the future, and Barette was kept in ignorance of the amount of his resources.

‘I have my mother’s fortune,’ Tom would say, without a thought of deceiving Barette as to its magnitude. The painter never guessed how slender his friend’s resources were growing.

‘Godiva’ had already achieved a success large enough to impose Tom upon the ignorant public, but those who were behind the scenes—theatrical critics, actors and singers, and professional musicians all over London, managers, theatrical agents, and publishers of music—were perfectly aware of the truth. The truth did nobody any harm—but as they supposed Tom Carroll to be a man of great wealth,

some of them thought of a fool and his money, and the rapid partition which is said to be effected between them.

Tom would willingly have stopped the work and closed the theatre long before the great libel case came on, but he felt how disastrous a step that might be to him. He could foresee the construction the other side would put upon it, and in fancy he could see an eminent pleader of name unknown pounding an assize-court table, and informing the court that the alleged libel had had the effect of closing a house in which such infamy was practised—that the witnesses had been purposely scattered by the complainant to prevent prejudice to his own case—that it was easily to be proved, and would be proved before that charge was disposed of, that the receipts at the house had never been higher than they were at the time at which the doors of the house were closed—and so-forth and so-forth. And

so 'Godiva' ran, and the law's delays kept the libel case hanging on, and the great gulf of poverty came nearer and nearer, and no man guessed it, except the man who was to plunge into it, and who saw no way to avoid it.

The fame Tom Carroll got out of the proceedings in the libel case was not of the sort after which he thirsted, and when the actual trial of the case came on he was subjected to great discomforts. Bowder, Q.C., was engaged for the other side, and made it extremely unpleasant for the complainant.

'Now, Mr. Carroll,' said Bowder, Q.C., hitching his gown at him when he got him in the box, 'I believe you are a man of spotless moral character.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Tom, who was cooler than he had expected to be.

'Pray don't accept that as my conclusion, Mr. Carroll,' said Bowder, who could be facetious. 'I may entertain a different opinion.'

Now this seemed a little unwarrantably insolent, and Tom let out a facer in return.

‘Naturally,’ he said. ‘You are paid to entertain a different opinion.’

‘I will leave you, sir,’ said the notable criminal barrister, with an air of dignity, ‘to reflect upon the good taste of that observation at your leisure. But now, Mr. Carroll, the standpoint you take is that you come into court to prefer this charge as a man of spotless moral character? Come. That is so, I fancy?’

‘The standpoint I take is that the article complained of is false and scandalous,’ said Tom.

‘And that you are a man of spotless moral character?’

‘That is a claim few men might care to prefer,’ said Tom.

‘You don’t care to put it forward in your own case?’ asked Bowder, Q.C.

‘Do you?’ returned the complainant.

The case was interesting, and the court was full. There were two or three barristers present who had nothing on their hands, and who knew Mr. Bowder and his ways. The defendant's counter-query tickled these gentlemen so that they led the court on to laughter, and for half a second the notable barrister was disconcerted. But this game of fence was old to him, and he knew better than to lose his temper.

'You mistake the situation, Mr. Carroll,' he said, with suave humour. 'It is you who are under cross-examination, and not I. Perhaps we may be allowed to put the matter in this way: Without actually being a man of spotless moral character, you like to be thought so.'

'Kindly proceed to your examination, if you please,' answered the complainant. 'You can't mend a bad case by intellectual horse-play.'

'You remind me of my duty to my clients,'

said Bowder, still suavely humorous, though a certain wickedness underlay the suavity. 'I am obliged to you. Did you ever stand in the dock of a police-court, Mr. Carroll?'

'Never.'

'Upon your oath?'

'Upon my oath.'

Mr. Bowder's attendant satellite pulled him by the gown, and whispered. Bowder stooped to listen, and arose smiling.

'At least, Mr. Carroll, you have been in the hands of the police?'

'I have,' said Tom, quietly.

'And this is not your first appearance in a court of justice?'

'No.'

'I think you did not make the other appearance to which I allude as a witness, but as a prisoner?'

'I appeared as the defendant in a case of assault.'

‘Don’t you think you might have been a little more ingenuous at first, Mr. Carroll?’ asked the able Bowder. ‘You did not appear in the dock? Where did you appear?’

‘I had a seat in the body of the court,’ Tom answered, feeling anything but comfortable. The apparent quibble in his answer troubled him. ‘Perhaps the court will allow me to explain. I have no desire to evade this examination. A categorical question was put to me, and I answered it; but I have no wish to fence about trifles.’

‘You think a charge of wanton and unprovoked assault a trifle, Mr. Carroll?’ asked Bowder. No man at the bar (and this is one of the blots upon our legal system which can scarcely be scraped away) is expected to be fair to an adverse witness.

‘Permit me,’ said the complainant, ‘to throw myself upon your merciful consideration.’ This he said satirically, and it was well enough,

but before it was fairly spoken he lost his temper for a second or two, and added, 'I neither said nor meant that, sir, and you know it.' He was not accustomed to be badgered in this way, and it cost him all he knew to restrain his anger. Anger gave him no advantage, and, recognising that fact, he prepared to control himself anew.

'Very well, Mr. Carroll,' said the barrister, jauntily. 'We will come to matters of fact. You have been in the hands of the police, and you have appeared before a magistrate. Was the charge against you dismissed?'

'It was held to be proved,' Tom answered, 'and I was fined twenty pounds.'

'I am obliged to you for your candour, Mr. Carroll,' said the Q.C., benevolently malicious. 'You were fined twenty pounds. And do you read the newspapers?'

'Occasionally,' Tom answered, seeing what was coming.

‘Are you acquainted with a publication called “The Mirror”?’

‘I know that there is such a journal.’

‘You know there is such a journal. Now, since you are in a candid mood for the moment, you may, perhaps, admit that you saw an article in that journal relating to yourself. I can assist you if your memory fails you. It appeared on the day following your appearance at the police-court. Did you see it?’

‘I saw it.’

‘I believe it spoke of your rowdy and disgraceful conduct?’

‘It condemned me in the strongest terms. I cannot call its terms to mind.’

‘It condemned you in the strongest terms. Thank you. Do you happen to remember that it spoke of the leniency of the Bench as having probably been extorted by your wealth and social position?’

‘I remember that.’

‘And that it expressed very strongly an opinion that your offence would more fittingly have been punished by imprisonment than by fine.’

‘I remember that also.’

‘I presume, Mr. Carroll, that you expected these questions?’

‘I expected them. Certainly.’

‘And that the prospect did not encourage you to pose as a man of spotless moral character?’

Cold silence.

‘Well, Mr. Carroll,’ pursued the practised tormentor, ‘that is a point upon which you are naturally sensitive, and upon which I will not press you.’ The people in the court thought this amusing and laughed at it. ‘But now, sir, will you be so obliging as to tell us what domestic event followed upon your appearance at the police-court.’

‘Be more explicit, if you please.’

‘I believe you maintain your innocence of that charge of which we have just spoken.’

‘Emphatically.’

‘Do your friends accept your disclaimer? Is it, or is it not, a fact that your father instantly cast you off, and that he still refuses to speak to you?’

‘It is true that I am not on terms of friendship with my father.’

‘And is it true that the breach arose out of your rowdy and disgraceful conduct.’

‘That is certainly untrue.’

‘That it arose out of the assault and battery upon the person of Mr. Moss.’

‘It arose chiefly, as I believe,’ Tom answered, ‘from my father’s anger at the publicity that case had received.’

‘Did he decline to receive your account of the case?’

‘Unhappily, he did.’

‘I can sympathise with your regret,’ said

Bowder, and this time the laughter was hearty. It was not the fault of the laughers that they could not know how lofty a nature which was thus tortured. 'Now I will ask you another question, if you please, Mr. Carroll. I see by the public advertisements that Mr. Bethesda is the nominal lessee of the Garrick theatre. Who is the real lessee?'

'I am the actual lessee.'

'And Mr. Bethesda, persistently announced as the lessee, "the sole lessee," never was the lessee at all?'

'Quite so.'

'Does a representation of that sort fit with your notions of spotless honour, Mr. Carroll?'

'It is a common practice,' Tom answered.

'And a most convenient one, no doubt,' said Bowder, in a sort of virtuous triumph over vice exposed. 'I will not detain you much longer, sir. The taking of the theatre was a purely commercial speculation?'

‘Not purely commercial.’

‘Not purely commercial?’ cried Bowder.

‘You have been kind enough to admit so much that, by-and-by, you may oblige us by admitting everything. What other element——’

‘I took the Garrick Theatre chiefly for the purpose of laying my own work before the public.’

‘And as a commercial speculation?’

‘And,’ Tom answered, ‘as a commercial speculation.’

‘Now, will you be good enough to tell us whether it has ever succeeded as a commercial speculation?’

‘It has not succeeded.’

‘Have you, or have you not, lost money from the first?’

‘I have lost money from the first.’

‘Is it, or is it not, a fact within your knowledge that the house will not hold enough to pay the working expenses?’

‘That fact was brought to my knowledge shortly after the opening of the theatre.’

‘And you held on to your precious commercial speculation?’

‘I had reasons for continuing it.’

‘We shall get at them by-and-by,’ said Bowder.

Then followed a long series of questions about Miss This and Miss That, to every one of which Tom could give a direct and honest negative. Beat about as he would, Bowder could fasten no admission on him here, but the young fellow already stood dangerously prejudiced. The judge knew how to estimate a good deal of what had gone on already, but the jury and some of the listeners thought the nominal lesseeship of Bethesda and the reckless financing of the house looked as black against the complainant as his admissions about the assault and the ‘Mirror.’

But many of the performers in ‘Godiva’

were people of repute, and they came up one after another to give a blank denial to the allegations of the libel. Nothing Bowder, Q.C., could do could shake these witnesses, and to any candid mind it was as clear as day that the morality of the Garrick was a little higher than that of most theatres, instead of being a great deal lower. In his address to the jury, Bowder, Q.C., was very crushing with the complainant. 'You saw, gentlemen, how he shuffled and equivocated and prevaricated in that box before you.' Bowder was so indignant at this that the jury really thought they had seen it, and shared the eminent pleader's indignation at it. Then the great man was mightily sarcastic over the commercial speculation, and having already dragged the real figures out of Bethesda, he demanded to know if any man in whom there dwelt one scintilla of intelligence was asked to believe that there was not some sinister purpose behind

a profusion so prodigal as that of the complainant. But he was at his best in dealing with the assault case. Here he rose to heights of moral indignation so sublime, and drew pictures of the wreck of domestic hopes in the Carroll family so touching, that the jury were ready to acquit the defendants on the spot. The judge set all this right, however, as he generally can do, and the intelligent dozen of men gradually sobered under the judicial shower of fact and reason. On the evening of the third day of the trial they retired, and, after considering for some half-hour, brought in a verdict of Guilty against the Editor. The judge, with a necessary word or two about the liberty of the Press and the sanctity of private character, sentenced him to twelve months' imprisonment, and the great libel case was at an end, and Tom Carroll's character had had the black so rubbed into it that nothing could get it altogether clear again. People

know very well that where there is smoke there is fire, and very few thought Tom well out of the case.

It is an old aphorism that you have only to throw plenty of mud to make sure of it sticking, and a good deal of the mud which had been thrown at Tom seemed still to the public eye to hold fast to him below his legal whitewashing. The case came as a sort of godsend to the newspapers, which happened otherwise to be dull that week, and it was reported at great length, a special staff being employed by each of the leading journals. There was not a man in England whose affairs were more relentlessly canvassed whilst the trial lasted and for a few days afterwards.

Now all this was gall and wormwood to Mary Lording, who heard a great deal more about it than Tom himself. Ladies found a curious fascination in the case, and spoke with a shuddering joy of that horrid Mr. Carroll

whom they used to think so nice and who had turned out to be so very, very dreadful. Some spoke in ignorance, and some in spite, and some in condolence, and the girl bore it, since it had to be borne. She refused absolutely and entirely to believe one word of evil against the man she had known from his boyhood and her own infancy, and had never known anything but a gentleman. She scorned and hated the calumnies which surrounded him, and she scorned and hated those who believed in them. She was not Tom's lover, but she was his honest friend and staunch partisan. And she would have been his lover too, with all these troubles behind him to push him into her arms, if it had not been for her own heart's memories of Baretta.

As for Tom, his position was extremely difficult. He was on the verge of bankruptcy, and the promises he had made to himself were unfulfilled. He felt himself soiled by the

infamies which had been brought so near him, and, innocent as he was, he felt vile in his own eyes when he thought of Mary. How could a pure-minded woman bear to think of associating herself for life with a man who had been the centre of such a story?

This sort of exaggerated fineness of sentiment, as everybody knows, can have the edge taken off it by close and constant intercourse, but Tom stayed away from Lording's house, and gave himself no chance. His growing poverty gave him a more genuine reason for absence than his morbid delicacy provided, and everything he had to do at this time seemed to proclaim him a failure.

When the trial was over the last reason for keeping up the run of the opera at the Garrick had disappeared. The people knew he was a failure, and that he had thrown away five or six thousand pounds in the attempt to make himself look like a success.

‘Advertise the last six nights, Bethesda,’ he said, to his manager.

‘There are no arrangements for anything to follow?’ said Bethesda, half questioningly.

‘No,’ said Tom. ‘I think I have had about enough of theatrical enterprise. Do you think we can relet the house?’

‘I should say there is every chance of it,’ said Bethesda. ‘Every chance.’

‘Very well,’ said Tom. ‘Send out the posters “Last six nights of the enormous musical failure, ‘Godiva.’” I shall be glad to have done with it.’

Mr. Bethesda, looking after the retreating figure of his patron, smiled humility and benevolence.

‘He can afford it, poor young gentleman,’ said Mr. Bethesda, inwardly. ‘It’s a pity, but the blow is not likely to prove fatal to him. I have not done badly in his company, though I expected to do better. A young gentleman

with a good deal of money and no knowledge of business is sometimes a very awkward sort of customer to deal with, but Mr. Carroll has been a pearl among employers.'

Since Tom would not call on Lording, the old fellow called on Tom, without any decided idea of what he meant to say to him. He began to talk about the finish of the trial, and after expressing his exultation at the punishment which had been inflicted upon the libeller, he found Tom so irresponsive that it was difficult to go on.

'Tom,' said the old boy, suddenly, 'treat me fairly. Tell me about your plans. What are you going to do?'

'I shall do as best I can, sir,' Tom answered. 'I can make a living, I dare say.'

'Make a living?' cried Lording, savagely. 'Why don't you behave like a sensible fellow?'

Tom knew what his companion meant, but

he returned no answer. He was all but bankrupt, and the whole world knew of the failure which had so long been bolstered up by money, and blazoned as a success in all the journals. And though he had gained his case against the scandal which had assailed him, he knew very well that there were scores of people who thought him soiled by it. It was in Lording's mind that Tom ought somehow to be penitent and ashamed of himself and generally docile, and, in fact, the two men were, in a word, at once depressed and irritable.

‘I’m not going to throw myself at the head of any man who doesn’t want me,’ said Lording. ‘I’ve stuck by you all the time, and I’d stick by you now if you’d let me. But since you won’t, I’m going. When you come to your senses, I shall be glad to see you.’

‘Very well, sir,’ said Tom, sadly and bitterly. There was no open quarrel, for there was no ground for an open quarrel between

them, but Lording rose and went his way. It was not his fault, he told himself. He was not the man to desert another in extremity. But he could go no further than he had gone, and it was shameful to keep on throwing his daughter at the head of a man who would not take her. But he was not happy, and he felt as if, after all, he had acted shabbily. This is not a sentiment calculated to improve the temper, and by the time he reached home he was in a state of hot wrath against himself and Tom. Mary saw his disturbance and asked its cause.

‘I’ve been trying to bring that young fool to reason,’ he said, rather unfairly. ‘He’s like a bear with a sore head. I can’t get a word out of him, and I’m not going to fling my child at the head of any man who doesn’t choose to take her.’

‘Papa,’ said the girl, bending over him and caressing him, ‘remember how tried he has been and how unfortunate.’

She felt that she, at least, should be true to him in spite of everything, and she went away to write a hopeful letter to him. If only it had been possible to make him happy without marrying him. She tried to write the hopeful letter, and the words that came to her pen were on one sheet so icy and on another so over-warm that she could make nothing of the task, and after a dozen efforts gave it up. If she could have written 'I love you, and if you leave me you will break my heart,' the whole thing would naturally have ended and determined then and there. But she could not write it truly, and she could not bring herself to feign it. And all the time her heart was more with Baretta than with Tom, and she had her own unhappiness, and the best of human hearts are selfish in misery.

The letter went unwritten. She would leave it to events to untangle themselves.

CHAPTER XXI.

ABOUT a fortnight after the closing of the Garrick Theatre Azubah Moore received an amazing statement from her teacher of singing. For the future his terms would be multiplied by eight.

‘But surely,’ she said, ‘that is a very extraordinary increase.’

‘As a matter of fact,’ said the teacher, ‘it is not an increase at all. I ask for no more than I have always received—for no more than the payment of my ordinary terms.’

She answered that she did not understand, and her look of bewilderment was too natural to be feigned.

‘The difference,’ he said, ‘has hitherto

been paid, but I cannot reckon upon it any longer.'

'Has been paid?' she asked, in angry amazement. 'By whom?'

'By Mr. Carroll,' returned the teacher.

'By Mr. Carroll?' she repeated. She could scarcely be angry at that, for it was to him that she and her father and mother had consented to owe everything. In spite of the daily papers, she was ignorant of the great libel case, and she knew nothing of Tom's losses, or of that family quarrel which had been made public all the world over.

'By Mr. Carroll,' said the teacher again. 'I had supposed you knew of it; but it was no concern of mine. But now, Miss Moore, that Mr. Carroll is no longer in a position to keep up his share of the payments, I must ask for a revision of our contract, or——' He made a motion with his hands as if he tossed something away.

‘Mr. Carroll is no longer in a position to pay you?’ asked the girl. She was not thinking of herself at all. ‘What has happened?’

‘I’m afraid,’ said the teacher, ‘that he is ruined. Haven’t you seen the papers? Mr. Carroll has been a good deal before the public lately.’

She could only answer, ‘Ruined!’ The thing seemed incredible.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the teacher. ‘If you like, Miss Moore, to enter into an arrangement with me to make over a share of your professional earnings for the first two years, I shall think it worth while to superintend your studies without present payment, and even to devote to you some special care and attention. Otherwise I shall be compelled to ask for my ordinary terms.’

She heard this, but had no understanding for it.

‘Can you tell me,’ she asked, ‘how Mr. Carroll was ruined?’

‘He seems to have lost a good deal of money in his theatrical enterprise, and to have quarrelled with his father. I know no more about it; but he is said to be completely broken. Will you think over my proposal, Miss Moore, and give me your conclusions on it?’

‘Will you write to me?’ she answered. ‘I cannot tell you what I may do.’

He promised, and she left him and walked away, feeling quite dazed and staggered. She was but a girl, with a very limited knowledge of the world and its chances of rise and fall. It seemed as amazing to be told that Mr. Carroll was ruined as it would be to the average citizen to learn for certain that the Prince of Wales was reduced to the shelter of the workhouse in his native parish. He had always seemed so far above distress, so bright, so gay, so grand

a seignor altogether, that he had been like the creature of another sphere to her. And now he 'was said to be completely broken.' What might that mean? Shabbily dressed, ill-shod, ill-lodged, ill-fed? Forlorn and sad-visaged, and in grief? She could picture him thus to herself, wild as the vision seemed.

She was country-bred and a staunch walker, and now, having her usual musical hour to spare, she went home on foot, thinking all the way. Latterly, since her father's accident, she had been accustomed to act and think for herself, and it was not in her mind as yet to tell anybody of the change in her own fortunes which Tom Carroll's fall had brought about. That indeed troubled her very little by comparison with his misfortunes. She was so full of him that when she reached home and found him sitting, genial and unchanged, in the shop which he himself had provided as a resource for the family, she had scarcely the presence of

mind to greet him with a mere good-day and a shake of the hand.

He was sitting at the counter talking to Mrs. Moore, with a glass of milk and one of the crisp little dairy loaves before him.

‘What excellent bread you have, to be sure, Mrs. Moore,’ he said, smilingly, ‘and what charming country milk. You ought to do a great trade here.’

‘We’re doing wonderful, thank God, sir,’ answered Mrs. Moore, in a flutter of pleasure. ‘And I don’t think as if Moore only had his health, poor thing, sir, we should ever ha’ been better off in wer lives.’

‘I’m heartily glad to hear it,’ he answered, munching away at the bread and sipping at the milk. ‘Beautiful bread this is, to be sure. And what a sauce an appetite is, Mrs. Moore. I haven’t had a meal of bread and milk since I was quite a baby.’

‘No, sir, I suppose not,’ said Mrs. Moore.

The girl stood by with her roll of music in her hands and watched him. Unchanged? No. That had seemed true in the first revulsion of reality from the dreadful fancies she had had of him; but now she could see the trace of trouble on his brow and in his eyes. He was very pale, too, and when he was silent a look of suffering would settle upon his face. In a little while he arose and went away with a hearty shake hands for each of them.

‘I can’t stay until Moore awakes, Mrs. Moore; but you’ll give him my respects, and tell him I called, won’t you?’

Azubah ran upstairs and watched him furtively from her own window as he went down the street, swinging his cane in a fashion which looked gay and light-hearted enough, if it had not been for her memory of those new lines upon his face and the look of trouble in his eyes. Whilst she watched him his cane

ceased to swing, his gait changed, he seemed somehow to droop in his walk, and as he turned out of sight the poise of his head, and indeed the attitude of his whole figure, looked not only thoughtful but despondent.

Azubah was one of those who act upon impulse, and who analyse the impulse afterwards or not at all. What impulse moved her when she ran downstairs and followed Tom Carroll she would have been puzzled to say, then or afterwards. It was certainly not curiosity. There was sympathy in it; but sympathy was not all. She had fluttered out into the streets, and, turning the corner Tom had turned before her, had caught sight of the retreating figure before any questions of her own purpose arose in her mind. Then she awoke on a sudden to a shamefaced feeling of obtrusive impertinence, and retreated with both cheeks on fire, but not before she had observed anew the drooping, melancholy gait into which

Tom Carroll had fallen, a gait which expressed despondency and irresolution as plainly as the words on a printed page.

There are prodigious numbers of people in the world who have learned almost all they know of human nature from novels and the stage. In life a man is not under the necessity of making his emotions understood by the denizens of a distant gallery, and nature plays more subtly than art ; so subtly that it is only one in a possible ten thousand of spectators who may guess at what this sign or that expresses. To walk four or five miles through daylight London is to be exposed to the glances of many thousands, and yet—unless you purposely publish them—to keep your own emotions secret. It is probable that nobody but Azubah saw more than a meditative slowness in Tom's walk that afternoon ; but she read, or seemed to read, something very like despair in it.

She thought of him sadly that afternoon

and evening. Nobody could tell into what depths of poverty she and her father and mother might have fallen if it had not been for his kindness, and now he himself was in distress. They could pay him back by-and-by what he had lent them ; but she knew enough of their differing spheres to tell that the sum which had made her father and mother fairly prosperous would be of little service to him. There are country gentlemen in England richer than the owner of Trench House ; but she had not been bred to think so, and she exaggerated Tom's fall because she exaggerated his former splendours. Yet they must strain every nerve to repay him now, little as it would be to him, and she herself owed him a private debt which she would be quit of in one way or another. The splendid, generous, kingly youngster, heir-apparent to the throne of Overhill, the lightest-hearted, freest-handed, and most friendly among men, and now 'said to be completely broken.'

The girl's tender and unworldly heart filled with a dangerous pity.

She dreamed in her broken sleep that night that he was in rags and starving, and she brooded unhappily over the dream next day. And sitting next morning in the little room behind the shop, still brooding over an idle needle, she saw the object of her thoughts enter at the doorway, and, being alone for the moment, she was forced to go in and meet him.

‘Good morning, Miss Moore,’ he said, with something of an embarrassed air, which she could read plainly enough, but was at a loss to account for. ‘I have business in this part of London just now, and I am becoming quite a frequent visitor. How is your father to-day?’

‘He will be glad to see you,’ said Azubah. ‘Will you come in and see him?’

Tom assented, and the girl led the way.

The old farmer with his wasted face and keen eyes sat in an arm-chair smoking.

‘Go and look after the shop, Zubah,’ he said, when he and Tom had shaken hands. ‘Mr. Carroll will take care of me for a minute or two.’ The girl obeyed. ‘And so, Mr. Thomas,’ said Moore, when she had gone, ‘our Christian friend has cleaned you out, has he?’

This query rather staggered the visitor, and for half a minute he returned no answer.

‘It was my own fault entirely, Moore,’ he said, at last. ‘If by our Christian friend you mean Bethesda——’

‘I mean Bethesda,’ said Moore, nodding.

‘I think he acted very fairly and honestly all along.’

‘Very likely,’ said the farmer, ‘very likely! Spilt milk, Mr. Thomas, is a foolish thing to cry over. I’m a dairyman now, and that proverb seems appropriate. But I was never

sorrier for anything than I was to read that story in the papers. Neither Zubah nor the Missis ever look at the papers, so far as I know; but I tore the leaf out and used it bit by bit for pipe lights, lest they should see it. It wasn't pretty reading, for a young woman in particular.'

'No,' Tom concurred. 'It wasn't pretty reading.'

'I've heard say, Mr. Thomas,' said the farmer, 'as your mother left you eight thousand pound. Now, if what the papers reported is true—I haven't seen our Christian friend lately, and so I haven't had a chance to ask him about it—if what the papers reported is true, there isn't a great deal of it left.'

'No,' said Tom; 'there isn't much of it left, Moore. There is very little of it left.'

'And you've split with the old Squire?' Tom returned no answer. 'It isn't pleasant to talk about it, Mr. Thomas,' pursued the farmer,

‘and I’m not talking out of idle curiosity. You’ve split with the old Squire?’

‘My father and I have quarrelled,’ said Tom.

‘Well, that’s no wonder,’ returned the other. ‘And what are you going to do? You haven’t been brought up to do anything.’

It was not easy for Tom Carroll to say that he was hawking musical manuscripts from door to door amongst the London publishers. He tried to answer lightly.

‘I will tell you my plans by-and-by. I have no fears about myself. I have a living at the ends of my fingers, Moore.’

‘And the old Squire’s taken up with Mr. Mark, has he?’ said the farmer. ‘I can manage to hold a pen by this time, and when I read that case in the papers I wrote to Wilkins and asked him to send me a line or two about the business. He tells me Mr. Mark prophesies everywhere that you’ll come to your

own again, and says he's nothing but a warming-pan.'

'Yes,' said Tom; 'Mark has been sanguine all along.'

'I'll bet he has,' returned Moore, with a dry laugh. Tom looked at him inquiringly. Here again there was an evident suspicion of Mark.

'What do you mean by that, Moore?'

'Mean?' said the farmer, in his crackling voice. 'That he *has* been sanguine all along. What the dickens else should he be? He was as poor as a church mouse before the Squire took to him, and now it looks as if he'd come in for a pretty penny. Sanguine? I should think he was.'

'Then you don't believe that my cousin Mark is doing his best to bring about a reconciliation between my father and myself?' asked Tom. There had been a time, not long ago, when he would have scorned to speak of these things or to listen to them; but that time had

gone by, and his childlike trust in all men had been sorely shaken.

‘I never set up to be a Solomon,’ said the farmer; ‘but I should never have been such a fool as to believe that of Mr. Mark, Mr. Thomas. About you, now, I might have believed it; for you’re one of those saints by nature that the world calls fools, and you’d wait an hour in the rain any day to help the lame dog that bit you over a stile. But Mr. Mark? No, no. That’s too ridiculous.’

‘Well,’ said Tom, with a dreary look, ‘there are a good many millions of men in the world who have to make their living, and if I am to be one of them I can scarcely think it a misfortune. And, whatever my cousin Mark is doing now, he had nothing to do with the quarrel between my father and me.’

‘Mr. Thomas,’ said the farmer, seriously, leaning forward as far as his damaged back would allow him, and tapping his visitor’s hand

with the waxed end of his long pipe. 'Take my tip, sir. Don't rely on a word Mr. Mark may say for you. It will never be said. I've known him since he was that high, and I've reckoned him up pretty completely. I shouldn't wonder if he'd set that nasty story abroad about you. He's the only man in the world, it seems to me, who has to gain by damaging you, and it comes natural to suspect him.'

'Either,' said Tom, 'my cousin Mark is the most patent rascal in the world, or he and I are targets for the whole world's scandal. But I have learned my lesson, Moore. I have been too much maligned myself to be ready to listen to scandal about other people.'

'Very well,' said the farmer. 'If Mr. Mark's a true man I'll eat him. I've known him man and boy this five and twenty years. He's too honest and open and above-board for my taste, is Mr. Mark, sir. You've been a true friend to me and mine. Let me do you

a good turn. Leave off trusting Mr. Mark. Play on your own hand. The old Squire's a bit hard, and as up-stuck as a hop-pole ; but he's as honest as the day. If he guessed Mr. Mark's game as I do, he'd be off with him in an hour.'

'Where's the motive?' cried Tom. 'Why should he want to injure me? I am out of his way already.'

'But you ain't beyond calling back again into his way,' said Moore, 'and he means to drive you.'

It was sufficiently unnatural if it were true, and yet in one way it was natural enough. Tom's heart was tuned to suspicion by Baretti, and if he really began to suspect he felt that he would be dangerous. It is not easy for any man to hold possession of himself when he has been robbed of love, good fame, and fortune ; and the youngster was not the Tom Carroll of old days.

‘Say no more,’ he said, waving his hand against the farmer. ‘I can’t afford to believe it. If I knew for certain that your suspicions were true, I couldn’t trust myself. And I am ill-tempered and vile-hearted enough to believe them. Give me a glass of milk, Moore, there’s a good fellow, and I’ll get back home.’

‘Strike that gong on the table, sir,’ said the farmer ; and, Tom obeying this injunction, Azubah came into the room.

‘Do you want anything, father?’

‘Mr. Thomas would like a glass of milk, my dear,’ said the farmer.

‘And, Miss Moore,’ said Tom, ‘if you wouldn’t mind taking the trouble to bring me one of those crisp little rolls, I should be much obliged. I think there’s something unusual in the air down here that gives one a most extraordinary appetite.’

He was so poor a pretender, and so unused to lying even in the mildest way, that he

boggled over this simple sentence, and the farmer looked at him with more than his common keenness. First he glanced at his fingers and looked at the rings there, and next his gaze went to the visitor's watch-chain.

‘Be so good as to tell me the time, Mr. Thomas,’ he said, when the girl had gone. Tom drew out a handsome watch and answered him. The farmer laboriously set his own to the time indicated, and Azubah returned with the roll and the milk. Her father made a faint and scarcely perceptible motion with his head and those supernaturally bright eyes of his. She caught the gesture and retired again. ‘Mr. Thomas,’ he said, when they were once more alone, ‘I’m ashamed to ask you, after all the favours you’ve done me, but can you make it convenient to lend me a five-pound note until to-morrow. I’ll post it first thing in the morning without fail.’

‘I’m very sorry,’ said Tom; ‘I haven’t

got it with me. I can send you one this evening.'

'Never mind, sir, thank you,' said the farmer. 'It's not a pressing thing. I must wait until to-morrow.'

'No, no,' said Tom; 'you shall have it.'

'It's very good of you, Mr. Thomas,' returned the farmer, falling back in his arm-chair with a singular air of relief. 'It's only a matter of four and twenty hours with me at the outside. The shop's doing splendidly, and I don't know that ever we were better off than we are now. We shall be paying our debt to you, Mr. Thomas, almost directly.'

'Thank you,' said Tom. 'Make it convenient to yourself, Moore.'

'Take another roll, sir,' said the farmer. 'It's a goodish step up to your part of the town, and I reckon it's an hour or two from your dinner-hour yet, isn't it? You can easy spoil your dinner by going too long without it.'

‘Thanks,’ said Tom ; ‘I’ll take another. What charming butter you have here. And the bread is excellent.’

‘Hunger’s a fine sauce, Mr. Thomas,’ said the farmer, and, looking keenly at his guest, he saw a disconcerted look upon his face, and half a blush that overspread its pallor. Tom called for his second roll, and despatched it together with another glass of milk ; and the two were silent.

‘I’ll go now, Moore,’ he said, rising, and whisking away imaginary crumbs with his silk handkerchief. ‘I have business to do. You shall have that to-night. I’ll send a commissioner with it.’

‘Thank you kindly, Mr. Thomas,’ said the other, shaking the proffered hand. His eyes lost the keenness which had commonly belonged to them since his disaster, and their shrewd suspicion melted almost into tears. ‘God bless you !’ he said, as he dropped Tom’s

hand. 'I don't believe a better man ever broke bread.'

Tom laughed uneasily, and with a farewell wave of the hand was gone. The farmer sat with bent head for a minute or two, and then, suddenly smiting the table with his clenched hand, he half rose in his chair and fell back in a spasm of pain.

'No good to anybody,' he muttered. 'If I'd got ten thousand pounds I'd give a thousand of it to be able to follow him and put the other nine thousand in his hands. The pride of the place! The pride of the place! As handsome a lad as you'll see in a summer's day, and as good as you'll find in a year's journey!'

Tom Carroll walked so slowly from South London to West London that it was dark long before his arrival there. He went irresolutely, and lingered at one or two corners, looking about him with a furtive air which became him ill indeed. Once or twice he seemed to

form a sudden resolve, and hurried on decidedly ; but his step slackened again, and again he lingered at corners, or stared in at jewellers' shop windows. At last he went hurriedly into a by-street, and almost ran through a darkened doorway, cannoning against an ill-dressed, slatternly woman who bore a large parcel in her arms.

For two or three minutes a figure had dogged him at a little distance. It waited now in the shadow of the by-street, and when he emerged from the darkened doorway followed him. He was like a man who had committed a crime and feared detection, glancing suspiciously right and left as he went ; but he never looked behind, and never saw the shadow in his rear. At his own doorway the shadow caught him and laid a hand upon him.

‘Oh !’ he said, starting as he turned. ‘Is that you, Baretti?’

‘Yes,’ said Barette; ‘it is I.’

Tom began to talk of nothings as they walked upstairs, but Barette spoke not a word until the two turned into Tom’s sitting-room. There he silently lit the gas and closed the door, and then turned upon his friend. Tom, looking at him, saw that his face was grey and that his eyes were full of tears.

‘Carroll,’ said the little man, with a shaky, husky voice, ‘it was here—in this room—that I told you all my troubles, and you relieved them. You were rich and prosperous, and I was poor and broken. We were not quite friends in those days—almost strangers; and you were angry that I had not spoken of my troubles sooner. And now, when you saved my life, and gave me hope again and made a man of me, and we are brothers in heart and soul—you can be poor, and you can let me be rich and prosperous and never speak a word. Is it friendly, Carroll? Is it just to

me? Ah, Carroll, you love your pride better than you love your friend ! ’

‘ Why, Baretti, old fellow,’ cried Tom, lamely, ‘ what’s all this about ? ’

‘ You do not care for me,’ said the painter, ‘ or you would not pretend like this, Carroll.’ He paused for an instant, and, advancing, took Tom’s hands in both his. ‘ I have been behind you this last half-hour. You have come to your last pound, and you have found my old miserable refuge. No, no, no ! Why should you be ashamed or angry that I know it ? ’

Tom walked doggedly into the next room, and the little man followed him. His voice was altogether broken when he spoke again.

‘ It is unjust, Carroll ; it is unjust.’ Tom stretched out a reluctant hand towards him backwards, and Baretti clasped it.

‘ Don’t make me break down, old fellow,’ the youngster said, with a half-hysterical laugh. ‘ I’ve been through a good deal of worry lately,

but I should like to keep a stiff upper lip through it all.'

But two slight meals of bread and milk in four days do not furnish the best diet in the world for a man's nerves to be steady on under pressure of this sort, and, with Baretti's tears upon his hand, the hapless lad turned, and casting his free arm upon the mantelshelf, dropped his head upon it and cried outright. And bitterly as his own tears shamed him, there was no shame in them, for it was not his unhappiness that made them flow, nor any cowardly pity for himself, but the sacred hand of sympathy that broke their fountain's stubborn seal.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN his native county Tom Carroll had by this time something of a Bluebeard reputation, and he became an almost proverbial illustration of what a young man might become by laying himself out to be wicked. To have cleared himself publicly of the charge publicly brought against him went for nothing. Young Mr. Carroll's conduct, it was generally admitted, must have been a terrible blow to his father, and a great deal of sympathy was expended on the elder Carroll's woes. Mark's chastened grief over his cousin's fall from the heights of virtue was noticeable and worthy of notice, and the mild hopes Mark nourished for Tom's final

reformation were supposed to do credit to his better nature.

The soil of human intelligence would seem to favour the growth of fallacies, but to be virtuous is not necessarily to be happy, and to be wicked is not necessarily to be unhappy. Conscience, popularly supposed to be a sentry, is so untrustworthy that he will go to sleep on guard unless you watch him keenly ; so that he is most active (like other troublesome functionaries) when least needed. To speak of conscience assailing some men, except in death-bed fears or like cases, is to talk nonsense. It has long been a cant of criticism that this or that villain of fiction is made credible by humanising touches, and we are told that there are no men who have not some redeeming virtue. Shakespeare thought otherwise, and drew one or two wholesale villains who had no good points about them, but he had no concern with humanitarian crotchets, and was satisfied to

paint men as he saw them. It is a far cry from the intellectual and social level of Iago to that of Bill Sikes, but higher than either, and lower than either, and in all the countless grades between, there are men who share their spirit.

It is not in the least to be supposed that Mark Carroll was unhappy because he was a very finished rascal. If he bit the kind hand that had often fed him, he knew all about gratitude and had exercised it so long as it had been useful to him, and his conscience (if he had a conscience) approved his action. If he lied for his own advancement, he did it cleverly, and his lies passed for truth, and success was satisfying. To have been a stupid scoundrel would have been criminal, but to be a clever one carried credit with it, and not blame. It was the shameless saying of a great man that a blunder was worse than a crime. Mark carried that creed further, and in his philosophy the only possible crime was a blunder.

He lived in clover at Trench House—was flush of money and had crowds of friends. In the house Tom's name was never mentioned, but outside he heard it often, and his attitude towards his cousin was always beautiful.

‘No, no, no,’ Mark would say when people expressed their sentiments about Tom. ‘Even the General Enemy is admitted to be less black than he's painted. And, hang it all! people talk as if a young fellow never kicked over the traces before. And, come now, I put it to you—Don't you think that Tom came out of that libel case very well, all things considered? I'll tell you what it is. Taking it altogether, I think my cousin Tom has been confoundedly ill-used. Lots of fellows have done the same thing in hot youth, and have settled down into respectable church-going citizens afterwards; and the chances are ten thousand to one that Tom will do it, if he only gets the chance, poor fellow. But just because he's run a bit wild

everybody's down on him like a hammer, and I'm sorry for him—downright sorry, by gad, I am !'

It is a curious provision of nature which fits every animal to his surroundings. The arctic bear grows white, the grasshopper is of the colour of the field, fish take the tint of their river bottom, and a persistent liar comes to believe in himself.

It may be noticed that Mark's conversational style had adapted itself or been adapted to that rôle of genial allowance which he played. Without actually sinking to the level of unsuspecting stupidity it had fallen from its habitual height of cynical cleverness, and there was a something half bucolic in his very manner. Of course he knew at bottom exactly what a pretender he was, but he had reached the persistent liar's bourne of vague belief for all that, and had touches of indignation and pity when he pretended to have them. With-

out something of the imaginative and self-projective power of an actor or a poet it is impossible to be a good liar. The simulation of the emotions awakens—not precisely the emotions themselves, perhaps, but—an artistic, thin reflex of them, and this it was which glowed in the bosom of cousin Mark, and gave his speeches an air of reality when he talked of Tom. But when Mr. Irving leaves the stage, though he has probably suffered all the woes of the Prince of Denmark, and has broken ‘the recorders’ with some approach to real passion, he has no grudge against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and nurses no special brotherly affection for Horatio. The woes, so keenly felt that you and I have thrilled at them, are packed away with the wardrobe of the tragic prince, and the great actor sups—if he takes supper—and blissfully forgets them all.

Mark used to watch within himself the workings of this singular natural process, and

used to extract amusement and philosophical edification from it ; but to be unhappy about his own conduct, so long as it prospered, never entered his mind.

But whilst he went on in growing ease of mind and constant bodily comfort there was trouble brewing for him in a quarter he had forgotten to think about. The charming Signora was once more out of employment.

It was characteristic of the Signora that she felt Mark's desertion less bitterly and hated him less intensely for it when she was prosperous than whilst she was poor. As a matter of fact, thousands of women have committed murder on precisely the Signora's provocation, and there were many times when she felt murderous : times at which she would actually have put an end to Mark if he had been in her way. At these moments she would not have paused to think of results, but she thought about them afterwards, when the fit of rage had passed, and

told herself philosophically that the game was not worth the candle. Only—if she could but catch him on the hip—if she could but see her way to a vengeance that would not be too dangerous to herself—— His violent death at her hands would leave a ghost behind, and that would be too much to dare.

The Garrick was closed, and no new opening declared itself. Whilst her engagement had lasted she had a little more money than she needed, and what was over and above her wants she saved. For a week or two she made applications hopefully, whenever she saw a chance, and then for a week or two despondingly. She was fast sliding back into that condition from which Tom Carroll had rescued her; and all her hope deferred, and all the rebuffs she met, and all the misery she dreaded, went naturally to swell Mark's account and to feed the flame of her hatred for him. If anything had occurred to make her independent of

the world, she would still have gone on hating him, but less fiercely. She might in a year or two have sunk into a mere contempt for him; but care coming, and hunger looking near, she set them all down to him, and her hate burned hotly against him.

She had invested a good deal of her small salary in what Mr. Wemmick called ‘portable property,’ and now she began to find her way to the pawnbroker’s, poor thing!

If we reserved all our pity for those who are pleasant and good, we should have to restrict our sympathies terribly.

In these straits, and before she reached them, she had often thought of applying to Mr. Bethesda, who might, for all she knew, be ready to start, or preparing to start, another theatrical enterprise. But she did not like Mr. Bethesda. She had not been bred to be a squeamish woman, but she had—as everybody has—her own moral code, and Mr.

Bethesda fell short of it. She had had experience of Mr. Bethesda behind the scenes, and that good man's affections for the sex at large had sickened her. Beggars, however, cannot be choosers, and at last she sought the residence of the late manager of the Garrick. That gentleman's influence with the Brethren had fallen away from a variety of causes, amongst them being the establishment (by Bethesda) of a Bible class for ladies of the ballet. No man can escape calumny, and the Brethren had cut Mr. Bethesda from their communion.

The Signora walked all the way from her lodgings to Mr. Bethesda's house, and rang the good man's bell. The good man himself answered to her summons and gave her a fatherly welcome. He had a rare eye for a good-looking woman, and his tastes were catholic.

'Tell me, sare,' said the Signora, 'is ze Garrick again to be open?'

'I can't say,' returned Mr. Bethesda. 'If

I could find the money I should like to take the house myself. You are looking for an engagement, my dear ? ’

‘ I am looking for engagement,’ said the Signora.

‘ Well, my dear,’ said Mr. Bethesda, smiling and fatherlike, ‘ a handsome young lady like you should find that very easy.’

‘ It is not easy,’ said the Signora, smiling also. ‘ Can you tell me where to go ? ’ If she had any hope of getting anything from Mr. Bethesda, she knew better than to try to get it by wearing a sad face in his presence.

‘ Pray sit down,’ said Mr. Bethesda, ‘ and let us talk things over.’ He placed a chair for the Signora and set another at the side of it. She took her seat and he took his. ‘ It is to be regretted,’ he said, ‘ that Mr. Carroll’s enterprise at the Garrick broke down so soon.’ He took the Signora’s unresisting hand. ‘ Much to be regretted.’

‘Very much,’ said the Signora, in her pretty foreign English.

‘But poor Mr. Carroll,’ continued Bethesda, slowly and distinctly, so that the lady should understand him and not get tired of his gossip too quickly, ‘was very extravagant, and is quite ruined, I am sorry to say.’

‘Poor young man,’ said the lady, her fingers itching to smack Mr. Bethesda’s smile.

‘Poor young man, indeed,’ said Mr. Bethesda. ‘I suppose you knew him very well?’ The Signora shook her head. ‘No?’ asked Bethesda, smiling again. ‘You came to the theatre like an old friend.’

‘I knew him,’ said the Signora, ‘a leetle. Very leetle. I had seen him two zree times.’

‘Was that all, indeed?’ asked the late manager, still holding her hand and bending forward as he spoke. ‘May I ask where you saw him—how you came to know him?’

‘He come to my husband house,’ said the

Signora. ‘My husband was the great tenor, Signor Malfi. He would come to my husband house with Mr. Marco Carroll. Do you know Mr. Marco?’

The Signora was the picture of innocence. She was apparently unaware of Mr. Bethesda’s possession of her hand, or it might have been an everyday thing to talk in that attitude; and her mention of Mark was made in the most indifferent manner in the world, though she was aware of a little inward tremor as she made it. The tremor in degree was not unlike that a maiden experiences when she thinks of her lover in love’s early days. In kind it bore a resemblance, for extremes meet, and hate and love are not always perfect opposites.

‘Slightly,’ said Bethesda, edging his chair a little nearer. ‘Poor Mr. Carroll’s fortune has all fallen into Mr. Mark’s hands.’

‘Ah!’ said the Signora. ‘How?’

Mr. Bethesda related what he knew, and in

the course of his narrative got his chair nearer still and set an arm about the Signora's waist. The lady, anxious to hear all, made no objection to his overtures, though her fingers tingled more than ever.

‘And is Mr. Mark,’ she said, catching at the English form of the name with difficulty. ‘Is Mr. Mark a very good young man?’ Bethesda had just told her for what Tom had been dismissed by his father.

‘I believe,’ said Bethesda, ‘that Mr. Mark is a very good young man indeed. Mr. Mark is quite a guileless person, so I am informed.’

‘And is Mr. Carroll so very good also?’ asked the Signora.

‘Oh,’ said Bethesda, smilingly, ‘Mr. Carroll is quite a stern, unappeasable, Roman-father sort of person.’ The Signora did not understand all this, but she caught the tone, and nodded with an answering smile. Bethesda, who was in a lover-like posture by this time, thought

the smile an odd one, and felt disconcerted by it.

‘And,’ said the Signora, still smiling, ‘if Mr. Carroll heard bad things of Mr. Mark he would send him away also?’

‘I should think so,’ said Bethesda.

‘Oh, dear me,’ said the Signora, in her pretty foreign manner. ‘What a hard work to be for ever so good young man. Where does he live, this good young man. The old one, is he very rich?’

‘Very!’ said Bethesda.

‘Where does he live?’ asked the Signora, again.

Mr. Bethesda told her what he knew, and made tender play with his hands in the meantime, squeezing the Signora’s hand and waist. She might have been a lay figure, she took all this so quietly; but when he had spoken she arose and disengaged herself.

‘I shall go now,’ she said. ‘If you

hear of anyzing, will you let me know, sare ? ’

Mr. Bethesda, protesting that he would, advanced with the obvious intention of kissing the Signora. Her previous acquiescence in the good man’s tender approaches might have encouraged one much more bashful than Bethesda, and it was a surprise to him when, as he smilingly proffered his salute, the Signora slapped his face. It was not the encouraging sort of box on the ear with which some ladies beckon on their lovers, but laid on with a quick and heavy hand. The wooer was so staggered by it, mentally, and for a few seconds his head rang so, that he let the lady go without a word in answer to her cool ‘ Good day.’

When he followed the Signora was already in the street. She smiled and nodded at him across her shoulder, and went her way, leaving the good man in a state of some depression and bewilderment. She, on the other hand, wore

an expression altogether different from that with which she had approached Mr. Bethesda's house. Her head was erect; her step elastic, her eyes smiled, and there was a fine glow of colour on her southern cheek. For she saw clear before her what she had longed for now for many and many a weary day, and she marched to it as a hungry man walks to a well-furnished table. If the elder Carroll had dismissed his only son on grounds so slight, he would be scarcely likely to have mercy on a nephew against whom she could prove so much. She would go down and denounce Mark and rejoice in his ruin. It would be cheaper than killing him (that was altogether too fearful a joy for her to snatch at—she had thought of it too long), and it would be a vengeance more complete and lasting. With all her hunger of hate for Mark she had a sense of justice too. To her mind, naturally enough, Mark was the greatest villain in the world, and she could

conceive of nothing worthy to be matched with his perfidy. The Signora was a simple-minded person, and did not bother herself with intellectual subtleties of any sort, or she might have called to mind the fact that if anybody else had suffered by it she would have thought Mark's perfidy a trifle. But your toothache is always worse (to you) than mine ; and I am never so persuaded of the solemnity of the problem presented for solution by the criminal classes as I am when I discover that my pocket has been picked. That which is nearest touches us most, and our own affairs are generally closer to us than those of other people.

It never occurred to her how easily Mark might turn her attack, or how hard it might be to get into places in which her denunciation of him would serve her turn. She walked on full of hate and hope, thinking of her monetary resources and planning to sell this and the other lately acquired bit of finery, to make a

purse for the journey. Beyond her revenge her thoughts did not carry her, and this alone might have seemed to make her dangerous if Mark had known of it. For without one conscious thought about the matter she was burning her boats, and if Mark could parry the one attack she had in mind that momentary success would make things worse for him.

The Signora's walk had given her an appetite, which she was disposed to fight for economy's sake. She was dreadfully thirsty also, and the sight of a dairy shop, exquisitely clean and neat in its arrangements, was pleasant to her. A glass of milk would at once assuage thirst and fortify her system, whilst it would only cost a penny. So the Signora entered, and found herself face to face with Azubah Moore, who was tranquilly stitching away with a book in her lap behind the white-scoured counter, with its clean glasses and glittering measures.

‘My dear!’ said the Signora, in pleased amazement, ‘how do you do?’

Azubah, with no very exuberant professions of delight, arose and shook hands with her. The Signora began to question and to chatter in her foreign lively way, and liquid foreign English. Had Azubah taken a place here? Had she determined to sing no more? How had she been doing, and what had she been doing since the Signora had last seen her? Azubah answered quietly that this was her father’s shop, that she was still studying music, and that she was very well indeed. The Italian woman got her glass of milk, and sat down at the counter to talk. She had tried to befriend Azubah, and that for one thing made her feel friendly; and in the time of her beginning of distress Azubah had been sympathetic. Altogether the Signora was delighted at this encounter, and for the moment she forgot her hatred, and her heart rested. She chatted

about her troubles, and told how poor she had been when she obtained an engagement at the Garrick, and how kindly the lessee had behaved to her. It was natural that she should be pleased to boast an acquaintance with the lessee, whom she had known in her better days before Tito went mad and mistrusted her.

‘He is ruin, now,’ said the Signora, ‘and I am sorry. He was never wise, but he was good and nice. It was sad for him that he should ever go to the Magatherium that night you sang there.’

‘Why?’ asked Azubah.

The whole truth, or very nearly the whole truth came out. The Signora had told the tale pretty often already to her fellow chorus-singers at the Garrick since the beginning of the libel proceedings, and the renewed allusion to the leading article in the ‘Mirror.’ But Azubah had never seen the ‘Mirror,’ and had never heard a word of Mr. Moss’s action for assault

until this moment. She had many and many a time thought of Tom Carroll as he had stepped in between that terrible little Hebrew and herself, and had remembered how noble he had looked, and with what strength and courage he had acted. Tom himself had never been proud of having thrown Mr. Moss downstairs, but Azubah had looked on the deed with reverent admiration, and had never dreamed that such awful consequences could grow out of it. She began to feel as if she personally were responsible for the ruin which had fallen upon Tom Carroll, and so much worship and gratitude and pity filled her heart that it felt like to break. She clasped her hands and cried out more than half-unconsciously—

‘Mr. Mark was there! Oh, why couldn’t he tell his uncle how it happened? He would know everything.’

‘Ah, my dear,’ said the Signora, nodding her head three or four times, ‘Mr. Mark is

going to have the fortune. He will do anything but good to his cousin.'

'Oh, I am sure you are wrong,' cried the girl. 'I have known him since I was quite a little child.'

'I have known him, too,' said the Signora. 'I know many things of him. He is bad man, my dear. There is no man more bad in England. I know. I know. I know.'

'How do you know?' asked Azubah. 'How can you know?'

'My business!' said the Signora, smiling. 'I know.' She nodded her head again, two or three times, in a curiously threatening way, which the girl was altogether at a loss to understand. 'He is very happy now, Mistare Mark. Very well. Wait. A week. Not more than a week.'

With this she laid a penny upon the counter, which the girl pushed back again. The Signora was not above economy at this time,

and returned the coin to her purse with another nod and a strange smile. She kissed Mary across the counter, and said ‘Goodbye,’ and walked off towards her vengeance. When you love or hate, the whole world is naturally full of the object of your thoughts, and it did not at all surprise her to find two people on one day who made Mark the theme of their talk.

Azubah, sitting with idle hands from which her work had fallen, thought over the revelation the Signora had brought her. Unstinted admiration and profound pity were in her heart, and when a girl begins to lavish these two upon a young man, it is easy to guess on what road she is travelling. Azubah had not far to travel, but she was a stranger to the road, and did not recognise the bourne that lay before her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MOORE received the five-pound note he had asked for and sent back another in exchange for it. It soothed him to get it, for he had guessed the truth about Tom's financial position, and now he was sure that his guesses had been mistaken, or had, at least, flown further than the mark.

Tom, of course, if he had had the choice, would rather have died than have broken down as he did in Baretti's presence, but his breakdown did him good after all. Lording seemed fairly estranged now. Mary sent him no message of hope ; he was ruined and everybody knew it ; he had even got bread this last two days by a subterfuge of which—though

it was not very shameful—he felt ashamed. Bethesda found a curious difficulty in realising the properties at the Garrick, which might at least have staved off starvation for a month or two. They had cost two or three thousand pounds, and were worth something still, and the unexpired lease of the theatre was supposed to be worth a thousand, yet he could not touch a penny-piece. But it was Baretti's friendship, and not these things, grievous as they were, which broke the youngster's self-restraint and gave him the blessed relief of tears.

He was less ashamed of himself than he would have been if he had cried in the presence of an Englishman, and Baretti saw nothing shameful in the whole matter, but wiped his own eyes unaffectedly, and without any attempt at the disguise of his emotions. Tom pushed him from the room, and being alone, pulled himself together and cleared away the traces

of his tears. Then, with a guilty air, half hang-dog and half defiant, he rejoined the little Italian and began to smoke moodily.

‘Carroll,’ said the painter, ‘let us talk of your affairs.’ Tom puffed away with an expression almost sullen. ‘You will finish opera number two?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Tom, ‘I think I shall go and fiddle in the streets. I suppose one could make a living that way, if it is worth while making a living at all. I’m not quite sure that it is.’

‘My troubles were less than yours,’ said Baretti, ‘but it was you who taught me how to live them down. You will teach yourself the same lesson. You are too proud to let any man say that you gave up the fight because it went against you.’

Tom smoked on and gave no sign of having heard this, but it was put in just the right way to touch him, and when Baretti had kept

silence for a minute or two the young fellow rose and shook himself.

‘Nobody shall say I threw up the sponge,’ he said, doggedly. ‘No, I’ll fight till I go under, for good and all.’

‘I know that,’ said Baretti. ‘It is your nature. You cannot help fighting in such a case. Let us lay the plan of the campaign. In the first place, Carroll,’ the painter rose to say this, and, with his old gesture, laid both hands on his friend’s shoulders and looked up into his face, his own lambent eyes agleam with affection and appeal—‘In the first place, Carroll, there is to be no more of to-night’s work as long as there is a pound at the bank belonging to either of us.’

‘I can’t be dependent upon you, Baretti,’ returned Tom.

‘No,’ said Baretti, ‘you love your pride better than you love me. Between friends there is no giving and taking—everything is in

common. Understand, Carroll. Whatever is mine is yours, and if you do not take it at your need we are not friends any longer, and you are a humbug and a pretender and no true man and honest gentleman. If you refuse me I swear to heaven I will draw every penny I have and throw it in the Thames, and never speak to you again.'

Tom laughed at this singular resolution, in a forced and unreal way, but he took the two hands Baretti stretched out and shook them both.

'Very well,' he said, 'we won't put you to such extremities as that. I can make a living and there is something to come out of the fire yet. And perhaps in the end even my father may come to reason.'

'He will never come to reason whilst your cousin Mark is at Trench House,' said Baretti. 'I speak in kindness, Carroll. Cherish no delusive hopes. In the pursuit of art there is

a future before you, but you must not demoralise yourself by fancies which are doomed beforehand to disappointment. Mark is your enemy, Carroll.'

'Don't talk of my cousin Mark in that way,' said Tom. 'I am getting a little tired of these charges against my cousin Mark. I never knew an honester fellow in my life, and I've suffered something from scandal on my own side, and I won't listen to it.'

'Well,' said Baretti, 'there are plenty of assurances of Mark's friendship in his own handwriting in that writing-desk of yours, and you have come to a time when you may very fairly try them. Then suppose you see your cousin Mark and put him to the test. He will not part with a penny for your sake.'

'I shan't ask him,' said Tom, shortly.

'At the bottom of your heart you know him as well as I do,' cried Baretti.

'A little better,' Tom answered.

‘You dare not ask him,’ said the painter, with his hands abroad. ‘You dread lest he should prove a villain.’

‘I know perfectly well,’ said Tom, ‘that he would prove nothing of the sort.’

‘He knows of your losses by the newspapers,’ said Baretti, declaiming indignantly, ‘and does he write from the home he usurps to offer you a helping hand? Why does he pretend to be advancing your cause?’ he demanded, with a sudden coldness of voice, and eyes half closed. ‘Because he is plotting behind your back, and wishes not to be suspected. Who set that libel about? Who but your cousin Mark? Carroll—I am indignant at your infatuation.’

‘Baretti,’ said Tom, moved by several contradictory emotions which he did not care just then to analyse, ‘I will disprove this foolish charge of yours, before I begin to be ass enough to believe in it. I will go down and see Mark

and tell him what a hole I am in, and you shall see how he will act.' After all Tom would rather borrow of Mark, with whom he had been like a brother all his life, than even of Baretti, and Mark in point of fact owed him a good few hundreds, and would only be repaying a little out of his abundance. That was one reflection. Another, which was in flat contradiction to it, was that he would like to be sure of cousin Mark, and in a certain case to have it out with him; and yet another was that he had it in his power to clear Mark's character from an aspersion even viler than any that had been cast upon his own.

He sat down and wrote a brief note to Mark, telling him that two days later he would be at the King's Arms Hotel in the county town, and would be greatly obliged if Mark would meet him there. There could surely be no shame in asking Mark, to whom he had lent so much, to restore a little of it, and yet

the impracticable, unpractical young man blushed as he wrote, and had more than half a mind to throw the note into the fire. Wishing it unwritten, and feeling sore with himself for having at last taken up Baretto's challenge, he walked out with the painter, and dropped his letter into a postal pillar, and then returning, pencilled a few lines to Moore, enclosed the promised five pounds with them in an envelope, found a commissionaire, despatched him, and went to supper.

He thought it curious, now that he had money to sup elsewhere, that he could find the heart to order the meal at home again. He had paid two months' rent in advance to oblige his landlady long ago, and had always kept in advance afterwards—after his own business fashion, which was to pay everybody twice over if possible—and he had not felt afraid to occupy the rooms for a week or two, but he had not been able to find courage to order so

much as a breakfast since his pockets were emptied. But now he began to be a little hopeful again. Mark would let him have fifty pounds at least, and he would make that last him for three or four months by dint of strict economy. In the meantime Bethesda could be pricked into action, and the theatrical properties and the lease must go at a sacrifice. Then he would be out of harm's way, and could at least dine every afternoon, whilst he wrote opera number two, or took to playing at concerts, or gave lessons, or prepared to hold body and soul together in some way. It did not seem very well worth while to hold body and soul together under the conditions, apart from the fighting instinct in him.

On the following evening he took train to the county town, and got as far as Birmingham without adventure. At the railway station there an odd thing happened, for he ran full against Signor Malfi, who was walking along

the platform at a great pace talking volubly in his native language to a bearded friend. Tom's wonder at his presence there was dissipated by the sight of a placard on which was blazoned in red and black letters the words 'Theatre Royal. Italian Opera.' Beyond a doubt the Signor was there in a professional capacity. The Englishman looked absently after him, and noticed something peculiar in his gait—a swift, sidelong motion of the body, and a certain set carriage of the head—as if the Signor were anxious for what he was saying to be heard, and at the same time anxious to keep an eye on some person in front. The bearded man got into the train, Malfi shook hands with him at the window, and Tom forgot all about them. His own affairs were enough for him to think about just then.

He passed a restless night, and on the morrow he got up and awaited Mark. Mark did not appear, having other fish to fry at this juncture.

The village of Overhill was a little startled and surprised by the sudden appearance in its midst of a nameless young woman, gorgeously apparelled and of evident foreign extraction. She did not seem to know anybody in the place, and did not seem to have any business there. So far as she spoke English at all, she spoke it fluently (though accent and idiom were alike foreign enough to be remarkable in so small a place as Overhill), but the speech of the natives seemed altogether incomprehensible to her. The people at the inn had at first been inclined to refuse her sleeping room, for she had no luggage, but she had smilingly set down a sovereign as guarantee for her own good intentions.

The foreign lady discovered that Trench House was the residence of Mr. Carroll. She ascertained also, in spite of the conversational difficulties which beset her, that Mr. Carroll's nephew, Mr. Mark, was at this time staying at

Overhill, and she manifested a good deal of interest in the house and grounds. On the evening of her arrival she entered the private grounds of Trench House—the lodge-gates being open and unguarded—and sat for half an hour on a rustic bench which commanded a view of the illuminated windows of the dining-room. There were two people at table, an elderly man and a young one, and a butler, rather sturdier and broader shouldered than his tribe commonly are, stood at the sideboard, or occasionally moved about the room in the discharge of his functions. So far as the foreign young person could observe, the younger man was exceedingly deferential to the elder. When she had sat out her half-hour or thereabouts, she arose and walked back down the gravel drive, and through the lodge-gates, still unnoticed, and returned to the village inn.

Naturally, all her points were canvassed

that evening in the bar-room, and the station-master, who happened to be present, contributed to the discussion the fact that a bearded person who spoke imperfect English had arrived by the same train, had watched the foreign lady into the little omnibus of the inn with obvious interest, had despatched a curiously worded telegram, and after lingering on the station platform for a couple of hours had gone back again without the transaction of any business whatever. The telegram had been written in Italian, and had contained two words only. The station-master, making a shot at the meaning of the first word, supposed the lady's name to be Ella, but declined on professional grounds to reveal the nature of the message. He was pretty sure, however, that the bearded person's sole business was to watch the lady and to see where she alighted. He was the more confirmed in this belief by the fact that the bearded person had arrived

at Overhill without a ticket from the county town, and had paid the fare on arrival.

Not to be unbearably mysterious, the foreign lady was no other than the charming Signora, and the bearded person was actually a friend of Malfi's engaged in the same company, but out of the cast for that particular day.

When Signor Malfi got down to Birmingham he knew vaguely that he was nearer Mr. Mark Carroll's abiding place than he had been when in London. Hate is just as good as love for keeping the object of it before the mind's eye, and there scarcely passed an hour in which Signor Malfi did not think of Mark Carroll. It did him good, however, and greatly soothed him to believe that Caterina could be trusted to pay off the score which had been raised by her own infidelity. His supposed propinquity to Mark's abiding place brought Mark into mind more than ever, and a sudden sight of the Signora on a railway platform had given him

a new and a terrible notion. The Signora looked prosperous, yet had no baggage with her, as she would have had had she been far from home. She was smiling when he had seen her, and had seemed in quite a festal humour, and the Signor's idea was that she and Mark were simply under shelter together somewhere in the neighbourhood. If that were so he had been more than commonly well fooled, and he was disposed to be more than commonly hurt by the fancy. Caterina's threats against Mark had sounded real enough, and he had believed in them. It might have been reasonable to believe in them now, and to suppose that the fair Signora was on the way to execute them, but Malfi's mind was poisoned by jealousy, and he was not in the mood to think of what was or was not reasonable.

He received his friend's message and he panted to be able to follow. It never crossed him to think that Caterina had gone down for ven-

geance. It only occurred to him that he had been doubly and trebly fooled. He looked forward with a shaky, terrible delight to the hour when he would be able to get away from the duties which held him and denounce and curse them both. His programme went no further. But though he was on pleasure bent, he had a frugal mind, and he did not care to risk the loss of his engagement. He stayed out the morning rehearsal, therefore, and being out of the cast for the evening, he took the mid-day train for Overhill.

Mark got Tom's letter, and laughed over it to himself. He put a ten-pound note in his purse, and arranged to split his little all with his cousin. Mr. Carroll the elder had opened a banking account for him and treated him in all respects as he had treated Tom aforetime, but Mark did not see his way to a mention of that circumstance. He told his uncle that he was going into town to see after a gun which had suffered some trifling mishap and had been repaired.

‘I am in need of exercise,’ said Mr. Carroll the elder. ‘I will walk with you to the railway station.’

Mark bustled about in an affectionate, half-reverential bonhomie, and got the elder man’s hat and walking-stick. Mr. Carroll the elder liked that sort of service, and was pleased ; but Mark took it as a matter of course to open doors for him and the like, as if he had been a marquis of the old régime and Mark a sort of privileged upper servant.

The two set out together, and it hit Mark like a hammer to see the Signora walking calmly along the one street of the village as if she had lived in the place all her life. She smiled when she saw Mark and recognised him by a mere drooping of her eyelids, which she made to act in place of a nod. The ready gentleman was for the space of one heart-beat as white as marble, and for the space of another or so he blushed like the red, red rose. His

foot tripped, once only, and he walked on as calm to outward appearance as before. The lady saw these signs and smiled again. She was going to crush him and ruin him, but she was not so poor an amateur in revenge as to do it all at once. She followed him slowly and at ease, accommodating her pace to the solemn, ponderous, and somewhat gouty step of the elder gentleman. She recognised him also, and she had noticed anew the deferential character of Mark's manner towards him. She either read in the elder's face or translated into it out of her own hopes a certain inflexible, dogmatic look, which argued well for her scheme, she thought. So she walked behind her victim, well pleased, and he glancing round casually saw her smile and cursed her, and went on talking in his own charming way for his uncle's pleasure.

It befell that Mr. Carroll found himself a little fatigued before much more than half the

walk to the railway station was accomplished. It had been at his own command and expense that the line was carried so far from Trench House, and he was willing to suffer for it, but to-day he had no need to go so far. When he parted from Mark he passed the Signora, and for all his grandeur and stateliness he could not avoid looking at her, once for curiosity, and once for a curious, extorted kind of admiration. She quite realised the elder Carroll's idea of a fine woman, and when he had fairly passed her he arranged his gold-rimmed eye-glasses and turned for another glance at her. It discomfited him curiously to find that she had turned to look at him and that Mark had at the same moment turned to look at her. What business had she to look at him? and what business had Mark to look at strange and foreign young women? He walked with added dignity after this.

Mark rejoiced that his uncle had left him.

because he had now a free field in which to tackle this young woman. What did she want? To extort money? Or to ruin an old and faithless lover? Or was she here by some curious chance and not by intention? He resolved to know, and that right early.

When he was persuaded that Mr. Carroll was fully out of sight he took a divergent course and strolled through a field or two. Then, lighting a cigar, he sat down upon a stile and awaited the Signora's coming. To his immense disgust she passed the first stile over which he had climbed, giving him a sweeping curtsey as she went.

‘Damn the woman,’ said Mark. ‘She thinks I am afraid of her, and wants to play cat and mouse does she? Very well, my lady. I suppose I’d better have it over.’

He arose and walked briskly back into the road, and there was the Signora placidly strolling ahead of him. He followed, and came

up with her easily. The road was quite clear and there was no great fear of being observed in her company.

‘My charming Caterina,’ he said, in her own language, as he came to her. ‘It is a pleasant surprise to see you here.’

‘Is it not?’ she asked him, without turning her head.

‘It is, indeed.’

‘I am so glad to please you,’ said the Signora, smiling. ‘You know that I made you a promise quite a long time ago. I am here to keep it. I have heard what a very good man your uncle is. I have heard that he is so very good that he could not even tolerate the poor, stupid innocent your cousin. I am here to tell him what a good young man *you* are, and to help to fix you in your place, dear friend.’

‘Thank you, my Caterina,’ said Mark, suavely. ‘Shall I tell you something you do not guess?’

‘If you please,’ said Caterina, smiling still.

‘You are the cast-off mistress of my cousin, and your object here is to extort money from me by threats. The first policeman we meet will see you out of the village to oblige me, and to avoid scandal he will do it quietly.’

She stood still in the road to look at him, and there was no vestige of her late smile in her eyes.

‘You see, Caterina,’ said Mark, ‘that it is scarcely worth while to play with me.’

‘I suppose,’ she said, quietly, and in a sort of wonder at him, ‘that you have told lies about your cousin all along.’

‘Assuredly,’ said Mark. ‘I shall tell lies about you if you make it necessary, and I shall be believed. That is the way of the world. Your injured innocence remains uncredited, poor Caterina, and my practised villany once more succeeds.’

‘Marco,’ said the Signora, ‘you misunder-

stand. I told you that I was dangerous. You do not know how dangerous I am.'

It was only within the last minute or two that she herself had begun to guess that.

'My good child,' said Mark, 'I am not in the least afraid of you, and I am not likely to be. I thought it well to see you at once and have the thing over. You sang in my cousin's theatre, and everybody down here is willing to believe anything of him. I am very sorry that he has sunk so low as to send you here to extort money from me for his own necessities, but if I am forced to say so I shall say so, and there is an end. I shall be believed. Nobody will understand what you try to say in answer, and if they did understand you, nobody would believe you.'

She felt foiled and desperate. There was a diabolical reason in this cool villany which staggered her. Why should people believe her? And how should they understand her?

‘Marco,’ she said, quickening her pace to keep up with him, for he had begun to walk on as if the conference had ended, ‘Marco, you will drive me to kill you if I cannot be revenged in another way. Take your choice.’

‘If you are not gone in two hours,’ said Mark, tranquilly, ‘I shall report your threats to the police and shall order your removal. Silly child. I don’t want to hurt you, but I won’t have you in my way.’

She walked on after him downcast and lowering in look.

‘I cannot go away,’ she said, after a while, in a tone which seemed to Mark’s ears to admit that she was vanquished, ‘I have not money enough to go back with.’

‘Well, as for that,’ said Mark, ‘I am not so hard that I will not help you.’ He thought of the ten pound note in his purse, but Mark never liked to part with money, and there was a partial claim upon that already. ‘You may

stay till evening. A train leaves at eight o'clock. Do you see that little copse? Do you see the white road across the fields, which leads from it to the railway station? Meet me there—near the great tree at the edge—do you see it?—and I will give you enough to carry you back. For once I will deal mercifully with you, but if you come again I will do that which will make you sorry till you die. Good day, Caterina.'

He walked on slowly, and she turned as if broken, and when he looked after her she was crawling along dispiritedly with hanging head. Had he known her thoughts he would have been less satisfied.

For all his outer coolness he had been so absorbed in speech with her that he had neither seen nor heard the departure of the train, though the warning bell and whistle had sounded clearly, and the train had gone steaming over the winding rails through halt a mile of open country.

‘Too late, Mr. Mark,’ said the station-master. ‘That’s a fine lassie yonder, sir, if you’ll excuse me saying so. There’s nobody down here, though, so it seems, that talks her lingo. I suppose you understand those outlandish tongues, having travelled, sir?’

Mark had been seen then in the act of alking with her. Well, his lie was ready.

‘You can hold your tongue, can’t you, Leggatt?’ he said, looking round in a confidential, secret way. ‘You’ve heard of my poor cousin’s doings up in town. That’s one of the painted trollops that sang at his theatre, and she’s down here on the look-out for him, poor beggar. I’ve promised her a pound or two to go away quietly and not to bother him.’

‘Poor Mr. Thomas,’ said the station-master. ‘He used to seem as good a sort as ever broke bread. He’ve brought his pigs to a baddish market, now, though, haven’t he?’

Mark assented sorrowfully, and walked away. Perhaps it would be as well not to leave Overhill to-day. The Signora might recover audacity in his absence. He went back and explained that he had missed the train and he stayed indoors all day.

Tom, meanwhile, waited and waited. There was no answer to his letter, and it appeared as if no notice were to be taken of it. Towards evening his suspicions of cousin Mark began to side with Baretti's, and he incontinently took train to Overhill. He would make no disturbance there, but he would have the truth out of Mark at least.

As he alighted from the train the station-master saw him and saluted. The village people knew him, of course, and most of them sheered off from him, though one or two hats were raised.

'Can I speak to you just a second, Mr. Thomas?' said the station-master. 'I wouldn't

be seen up village to-night if I was you, if you'll excuse me, sir. There's that foreign young person, sir, down here, sir, and I gather from Mr. Mark that there'll be a row if she sees you.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

TOM looked with a changeful countenance at the station-master.

‘What do you mean by saying that you gather that from my cousin?’ he asked, after a pause which was remarkable for its length and for the indications of emotion in Tom’s face whilst his silence lasted. ‘Tell me what you gather from my cousin Mark.’

‘Well, sir,’ returned the station-master defensively, ‘I spoke in friendship, sir, and I trust there’ll be no ill-will because I dared to mention it. Mr. Mark deposes that the foreign person is looking for you, sir, and he seems to think that if she sees you the fat will be in the fire.’

‘Why?’ asked Tom, briefly.

‘Well, sir,’ said the man, with a laugh, awkward and embarrassed, ‘that’s for you to say.’

‘I want to understand this, if you please, Leggatt,’ said Tom, grasping his stout walking-cane with both hands, and speaking with some difficulty and slowness. ‘What has my cousin told you?’

‘Well, sir,’ returned the station-master, ‘in round English, he told me nothing that *he* ought to be ashamed of. I don’t know about your share in the matter.’

‘What did he tell you?’ asked Tom, again.

‘Well, sir,’ said the man, with a touch of virtuous indignation, ‘he did say that the young woman was one of the trollops that Overhill’s heard too much of. I’m sorry I took the trouble to speak about the matter, sir. She’s in the village, if you like to face her.’

‘It’s curious, Leggatt,’ said Tom, ‘how easy

it seems for everybody to believe evil of a man. I must see this young lady, and find out who she is at least. Tell me one thing. Has—— Never mind. Good day, Leggatt.'

Tom swung out of the station, and the master watched him as he walked towards the village. The lad was reckless by this time. Mark's desertion of him seemed definite enough, and though Tom could not as yet grasp the details of the new situation, it was plain that his cousin was maligning him, and plain that Baretti's suspicions had all along been well founded. Tom thought of the old days when he had been prosperous, and had stretched out a free hand to Mark. He remembered the countless favours he had done him, and the affection he had always felt for him, and every memory made Mark's villany the blacker.

'I shall kill him if I see him now,' he said to himself, and slackening his pace he began to walk indeterminately.

Even at this time the habit of his whole life and the bent of his whole nature asserted themselves, and he began to seek explanations and to cling to excuses for Mark. It was not altogether impossible that Mark's faith in him had been destroyed by the constant rumours about him. Other people had fallen away from him, and Mark need after all have been guilty of no such wilful crime as Tom's thoughts imputed to him. Mark and Tom were such old sailing companions. Almost anything seemed more credible than that Mark should have deliberately cut the ties of countless favours, of friendship, and of blood, to leave the cousinly craft adrift. That he should fire into it began to seem hardly believable at all.

‘If I find it all true,’ said Tom to himself, a hundred times. Then he would grasp his stout walking-stick more tightly, and his nerves would tingle, and his cheeks flush and eyes glitter. ‘Mark’s like the rest of them, and

can't keep his faith in an old friend against scandal.' That reflection was only sorrowful, and carried no rage with it like the other. And sorrowful as it was it had a little comfort in it. You would rather your friend should wrongfully suspect you of evil than that he should deliberately turn traitor.

Now came still evening on, and Tom Carroll was yet walking indeterminately about the fields and lanes. He was half disposed to go back and leave Mark alone, and half disposed to walk boldly up to the house of his birth and demand to see Mark there and have it out, when chance, which decides for so many of us, decided for him. Cousin Mark heaved in sight, tranquilly smoking a cigar and twirling a walking-cane. Tom rose from the stile on which for the last minute or two he had been sitting, and went forward to meet him. Mark caught sight of him as he rose, and for a second the ready young's man foot lingered on the

road, and his swift faculty of invention struck out all round in search for any impromptu weapon of defence.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, hastening forward, and taking Tom by the hand, ‘don’t you think you’re acting somewhat precipitately in coming here?’

‘It may turn out that I am a little late rather than a little precipitate,’ Tom answered. Mark’s hand thrown towards him in vigorous welcome had mechanically drawn his own to meet it, but Mark felt no answering pressure to his own honest grip.

‘What do you mean, Tom?’ he asked. There was a tone of wounded friendship in his voice.

‘Let me ask you one or two questions,’ Tom said, quietly, though his voice shook.

‘Willingly, my dear fellow,’ answered Mark. ‘Shall we walk the while?’

He put an arm through his cousin’s and

made a forward step, but Tom stood stock still. Mark permitted no change to reach his face, though his companion's presence there was more than annoying, and in a moment might be dangerous. They were within twenty yards of the Signora's trysting-place, and within a few minutes of her time.

'I want to ask you, to begin with,' said Tom, huskily and slowly, 'if you have lost all your faith in the professions of innocence I have made to you?'

'What a question!' said Mark, turning his face upon him in surprise. 'Good God, my dear fellow, No. A thousand times No.'

He made another movement to step forward and again Tom stood immobile and irresponsive.

'You believe,' said Tom, speaking more huskily than before, and withdrawing his arm from Mark's so that he might stand squarely in front of him. 'You believe now, as you have

always professed to believe, that I have been maligned ?’

‘ I don’t merely believe it, Tom,’ said Mark, ‘ I know it.’

‘ Then,’ asked Tom, laying a sudden hand upon the lappel of Mark’s coat, ‘ why do you spread the scandal ? ’

‘ I spread the scandal ? ’ said the other, with an air of indignant amazement and remonstrance. ‘ What absurdity is this ? ’

‘ Leggatt, the station-master,’ said Tom, with a tightening grip upon Mark’s coat, ‘ gathers from my cousin Mark that one of the young women of whom Overhill has heard too much in connection with my name is down here to look after me.’

‘ Leggatt,’ said Mark, ‘ is a drunken liar.’

‘ Thank you,’ said Tom. ‘ Come and tell him so in my presence, Mark.’

Mark reached out both hands quietly, and took Tom pretty firmly by the shoulders.

‘I shan’t do that, Tom.’

‘Why not?’ Tom demanded.

‘I can’t afford to lose the confidence of the village people.’ The hand upon the lappel of Mark’s coat so far relaxed that Mark by the mere act of sliding his hands from Tom’s shoulders to his arms removed it. The two were standing face to face, and were looking in each other’s eyes. Tom’s face was flushed, and Mark’s was white, but the white face was the steadier of the two.

‘Do you mean,’ said Tom, ‘that you cannot deny it in his presence?’

‘Quite right, Tom,’ answered Mark, entwining his gloved fingers firmly in the sleeves of his cousin’s coat. ‘You have found me out, as there was always a chance of your doing, and things have gone on so well with me that I don’t much care. My footing is pretty safe now, and nothing you can say or do can shake me. But if I give one of the villagers the

chance to say I am a liar, I pull down my own stronghold.' Tom stood quite still, breathing hard and slow, and looked Mark in the eyes. Mark looked back at him and spoke like a victor to an enemy. 'It was likely enough that you would have to know one day or other. You know now, and I suppose we declare open warfare.'

Mark's grip on his cousin's sleeve was firm and hard, and he waited with wary eye and every muscle ready. He could guess partly at the rage and wonder and contemp which chased each other in Tom's mind and were faintly mirrored in his face.

'You infamous scoundrel,' cried Tom. 'You villain.' Mark looked at him steadfastly, and Tom, making a backward movement of aversion and disdain, found himself pinioned in his cousin's grasp. 'Let me go,' he cried. 'You infamous hound.'

Mark, with his eyes steadfastly fixed on

Tom's, released him. There was no threat of immediate personal violence in the manner of the man whom he had wronged, and to Mark that was satisfactory. He knew the emotions to be complex things, and he had expected that Tom would find his chief solace in contempt, or in what he supposed to be contempt—a mental condition founded chiefly—according to Mark's analysis—on hate and envy.

‘I begin to know now,’ said Tom, who might have been the detected villain of the two, he looked so disturbed by contrast with the other. ‘I have heard you describe yourself often enough. But I never thought that a man could be such a dastard.’ Mark held him with a glittering eye and kept silent. ‘You think you have won? You think you are safely seated?’ Not a word from Mark, not a sign. Only that persistent, unchanging, watchful glance, cool and wary and wicked. ‘An honest man's contempt is too slight a weapon

to pierce that callous hide of yours? You hound.'

When the blow came Mark was ready for it. Tom's stick lashed out straight at his face, and Mark parried, like the skilful player he was. But Tom's rage, which might have wreaked itself in one stroke, if the one stroke had taken effect, carried him beyond all restraint when he found it intercepted, and casting away his stick he hurled himself bodily upon Mark, and took him by the throat. As quick as lightning Mark crooked him by the heel and fell upon him.

'Don't fight like a wild beast, my good fellow,' said Mark, regaining his feet. 'I don't want to hurt you, and you can't hurt me. I could kill you in five minutes, and if you have a grain of sense left you know that.'

Tom rose a little dazed and staggered. The evening was closing rapidly, but there was still light enough for a man to see to fight by, and

he rushed at Mark once more, but only to be met by a crashing smack half on the jaw and half on the neck. This brought him to his hands and knees sick and dizzy and trembling, and for a moment he could not rise.

‘You can see,’ said Mark, ‘what an infernal fool you are. I don’t want to hurt you, but I can’t stand still and be mauled, and if you will have it you will have it. I always knew you were a fool,’ he added, coolly, with air and voice of contemptuous expostulation, ‘but, hang it all, can’t you see what an ass you’re making of yourself now? It’s natural enough that you should want to give me a hiding, I dare say; but—— Well, if you will, you will.’

Tom was up again and making for him once more. Mark could just see his gleaming eyes in the dusk, and wondered if his own shone so. The whole affair was eminently distasteful no doubt, but he was quite quiet about it. It began to be clear that Tom meant to go on trying

as long as he had the power to make an effort, and the conflict, one-sided as it was, promised to last some time. By-and-by there would be the Signora as a witness to it, and that odd sense of fun which Mark owned made him laugh at the fancy that the lady might take the aggressor's side.

‘That would import a new interest,’ said Mark, silently and to himself. Tom saw the laugh in his cousin's face (for Mark faced the waning light) and somehow the sudden deep hatred born of the other's cynicism and villany seem to cool him. Mark boxed splendidly, and Tom was but a poor opponent for him, though he was not altogether ignorant, and was altogether fearless. There was one idea alone in his mind, he was bent on thrashing Mark. In fine, he was dangerous ; for science, though it goes for much, is not everything in an encounter with the weapons of nature, and the clumsiest duffer may get one in by chance. Tom came

up warily this time, and for a minute or nearly neither had an advantage worth naming. Then Tom landed with that unskilful right of his, delivered in direct defiance of art and rule, but telling heavily. Mark's counter was smart but ineffective, and Tom, seeing his chance, followed with the left, put in the right again with the whole weight of his body behind it, and stood over the prostrate Mark, somewhat to his own amazement, victor for the moment.

Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just, and it may be admitted that if ever a man had the right to thrash another, Mark had conferred such a right upon his cousin. Mark's confidence was shaken, and as he rose he said to himself, 'I may have to take a hiding after all.' Tom, standing by for the renewal of hostilities, said to *himself*, 'I shall win.' Mark was no coward, but he did not scorn punishment as Tom did, and that went a long way towards

balancing the difference in skill, since the least skilful had begun to prove the doctrine of chances. It was getting dark, too, and that helped to equalise matters. In boxing you want to see your friend's eye, just as you do in fencing, and there is a curious instinct awakened by practice, which tells you exactly which feature the eye has chosen, and you have telegraphed to you with unfailing accuracy the point of time at which the advancing and retiring left will shoot straight from the shoulder. I write for the ignorant. The learned know these things.

Genuine scorn of pain or disfigurement began to tell. The stern yearning for a just revenge was stronger than the mere instinct of self-defence, and Tom's constitutional stamina was greater than his cousin's. Mark, being knocked clean off his legs for the third time, declined to get up again. He was a young man in whom there was no faculty for shame,

and he was getting the worst of it under these unfavourable conditions.

‘I have had enough,’ said Mark.

‘I have not,’ said Tom, grimly. ‘Stand up.’

‘I tell you I’ve had enough,’ Mark replied, with excusable asperity.

‘Stand up,’ said Tom, again, ‘or I’ll cane the life out of you.’

Mark stood up, desperate, and prepared to renew the conflict.

‘How long?’ he asked. ‘How long do you mean to carry on this business?’

‘Till one of us kills the other,’ said Tom.

The sincerity of this declaration was undoubtable, and Mark felt a chill as he looked at the prospect. This mild, long-suffering fool of a cousin of his had an animal strain in him after all, and could be stirred up to a real vengeance. Mark began to fight this time with the energy of desperation, but the steel was

taken out of him already, and in two or three minutes he was down once more.

‘Stand up,’ said Tom, again. Mark made no answer, and Tom, whose foot touched his discarded cane at this moment, stooped and picked up the weapon.

‘Fair play,’ cried Mark, struggling to his feet.

‘You mistake the situation, Mark,’ said Tom, with a bitter coolness which had a passion of rage within it. ‘This is not a conflict according to the laws of the prize-ring. It is an execution. Come, sir.’

To deal briefly with a subject which can have but little charm to the tender-hearted, Tom Carroll held his hand when the walking-cane broke in pieces, but not before. At first Mark took it fighting, but for the last minute or two he was on his knees, and only the cousinly hand upon his collar kept him from falling in a huddled heap upon the turf. When

at length Tom threw away the stump of the cane and released his hold, Mark dropped like a limp towel.

‘Now I have had enough,’ said Tom, not altogether unreasonably.

He found his hat, threw the overcoat he had discarded at the second or third round over his arm, and went away, leaving Mark still coiled up on the turf, moaning, and for the moment half unconscious. When Mark arose he cursed with a subdued intensity which was not unworthy of the situation. He had not merely been royally thrashed, so thrashed that he could scarcely stand or crawl, but he had been thrashed by a man much less able than himself, and the reflection was galling. Still, his sense of the fitness of things was not wholly disturbed. He saw that, from Tom’s point of view, the night’s work looked natural.

Tom, meanwhile, having discharged his mission, walked towards the railway station.

In this world things are so ordered that no joy is permanent, no happiness stable. For the first two or three hundred yards the gladness of battle abode with him, but then a shade of compunction began to steal over his heart. He told himself that Mark had deserved all he had got, and more, but he was naturally of a merciful turn, and, except in the heat of passion, could have hurt no human creature, however obnoxious and hateful. The sense of compunction was not strong enough to mount into repentance, but it dashed his vengeful pleasure.

‘I have no right to be pleased,’ said Tom, as he walked. ‘The work was dirty, though necessary and just ; and no man has a right to extract pleasure out of such a business.’

Yet he missed the exhilarating glow of revenge accomplished ; and, by the time of his arrival at the station, he was depressed and almost miserable. The little first-class waiting-

room there had a mirror on the wall, and catching sight of his own reflection within it he started with surprise. A cut on the forehead, with dry blood barked about it, looked terrible. His nose and upper lip were of abnormal size, his shirt was open at the collar, his necktie was wildly disarranged, and there were two or three buttons missing from his waistcoat. He had scarcely felt his own damages until now ; out of sight was out of mind ; but he began to be conscious of sundry aches and pains, and he found that he could scarcely raise his right hand to his head. That fact was, of course, traceable to the vigorous employment of unaccustomed muscles, and was in itself a testimony to the completeness of the castigation inflicted upon cousin Mark.

Tom walked to the station-master's private door, and knocked there.

‘ Can you let me have a wash, Leggatt ? ’
he demanded, when the man appeared.

‘Certainly, sir,’ said Leggatt, with polite deference. ‘Come in, sir.’

When Tom walked into the light the man literally jumped.

‘God bless my soul, sir,’ he cried, ‘you’re covered with blood.’

‘I don’t think there’s much the matter,’ said Tom, quietly. ‘When is the next train?’

‘Due in five minutes, sir,’ said Leggatt, staring at him. ‘Have you been having a fight, sir, or what? You’re awfully knocked about, sir.’

‘That reminds me,’ said Tom, with apparent calmness. ‘When you can find time you had better take the porter with you, and walk up to Marston’s Spinney. I think you will find my cousin there. He wants looking after.’

The station-master paused in the act of pouring water in a basin, and asked:

‘You’ve had a row with Mr. Mark, sir?’

‘Yes,’ said Tom. ‘We have quarrelled,

and I have given him a thrashing. I think he deserved it. But he wants looking after, I fancy, and perhaps you had better see to it. If any inquiries should be made after me you can say that I have gone straight up to town.'

'I hope you've done no mischief, sir,' said the station-master.

'He will be all right in a week or two,' said Tom, calmly. 'A little soap, if you please. Thank you.'

The station-master, with distracted visage, stood by whilst the young man washed, and he saw that both hands and the cuffs of his shirt were caked with blood. Tom borrowed a hair-brush when he had washed, and in a minute or two looked half-respectable again. The warning bell rang outside and the two came upon the platform together.

'Goodbye, Leggatt,' said Tom, as he stepped into the carriage. It was the last train

for the night, and he was the sole passenger from the little Overhill terminus. ‘There’s half a sovereign for you. Look after my cousin, if you please. I think it likely that you will find him just at this end of the Spinney. If not, you may make inquiry about him and see if he has got home.’

The engine and its three coaches steamed away, and the station-master was left agape on the platform. A minute or two had elapsed before he spoke to the porter, who was preparing to go home, and bade him get a light. The two went together to the place indicated and searched about until they found a patch of trampled grass, evidently the scene of battle. There had been rain within a few hours, the soft turf had easily torn away, and scores of little patches of bare earth were shown by the light of the lantern.

‘Mr. Mark has got up and quitted,’ said the porter, swinging the light to and fro; ‘but

there's been a pretty tidy conflict by the look of things.'

'Hush!' said the station-master. 'Listen. What's that?'

'There was a heavy groan from near at hand, and the men, hearing it plainly, stood still and trembled.

'There's been a bad night's work here, I'm afraid,' said the chief. 'A man ain't battered about in fair fight till he cries like that.'

'Here he is,' cried the porter, after waving his lantern to and fro again. In another moment they stood above Mark Carroll's prostrate figure. He lay all abroad, with his face upwards, and his chin pointed to the sky. His arms and legs were flung helplessly into the form of the letter X, and at intervals of thirty seconds or thereabouts he groaned terribly. If the two searchers had advanced in silence they must have heard him long ago. Whilst they looked the station-master suddenly

dropped upon his knees so that his face came into the circle of light. His shaky forefinger almost touched a something white which stuck out from the breast of the recumbent figure. The porter dropped upon his knees on the other side, and the two glared at each other.

‘Stabbed!’ gasped one, and the other answered in the same word like a husky echo.

The white object was the ivory handle of a dagger, and the blade was buried in Mark Carroll’s body.

‘For Heaven’s sake,’ said the porter, ‘don’t touch it. I’ve heard tell it’s certain death, unless you’re a doctor. Shall I run for Doctor Morton?’

‘No,’ cried the station-master, rising and recoiling in a single motion. ‘Stay here. I’ll go.’

He sped across the fields, and the porter knelt trembling on the grass, whilst the wounded man beside him groaned at intervals

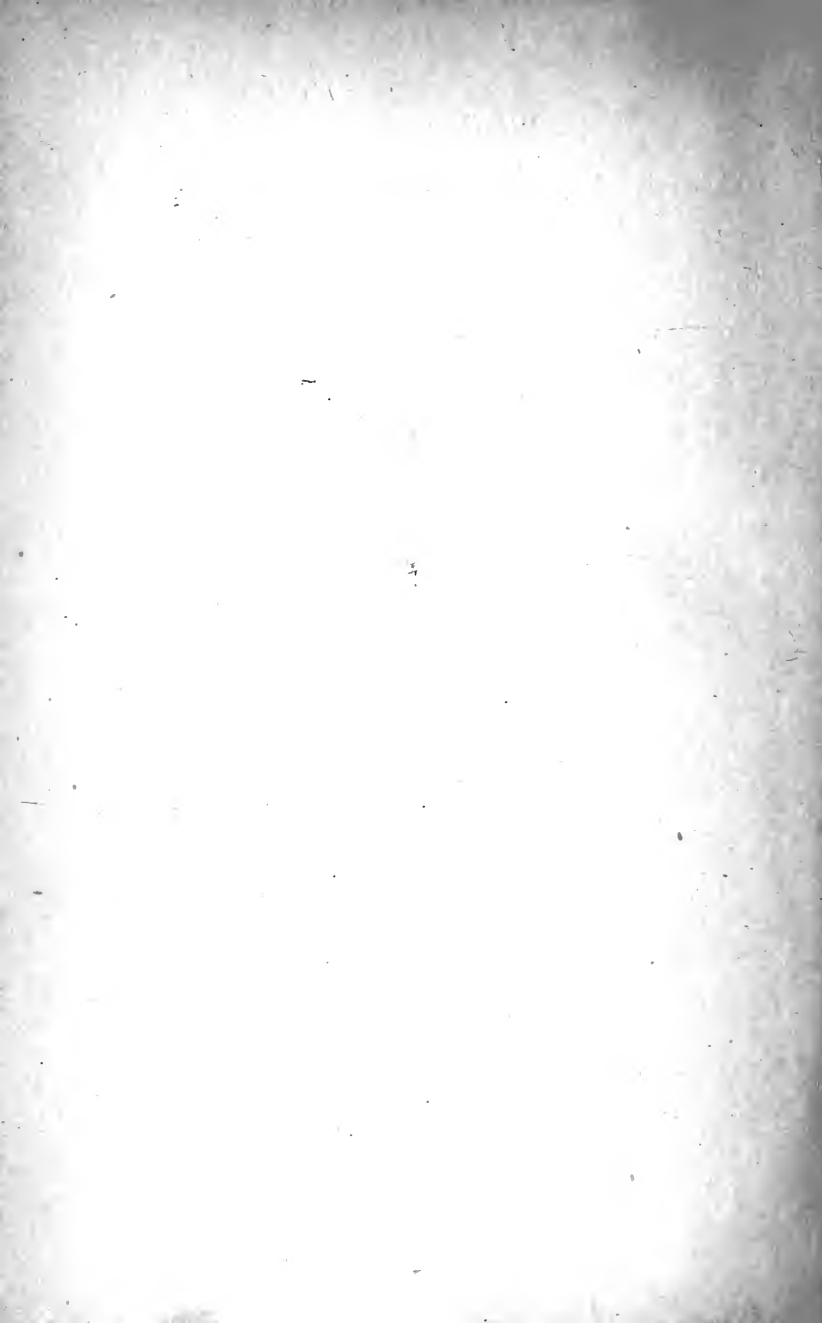
which felt like hours. After an awful time came lights and voices, and figures moved about the field as if in the uncertain horror of a dream. The doctor came with the little crowd of people who had been summoned to assist, and in a while the wounded man was taken up and borne home amidst dreadful whispered guesses, and the lights and the frightened faces passed away.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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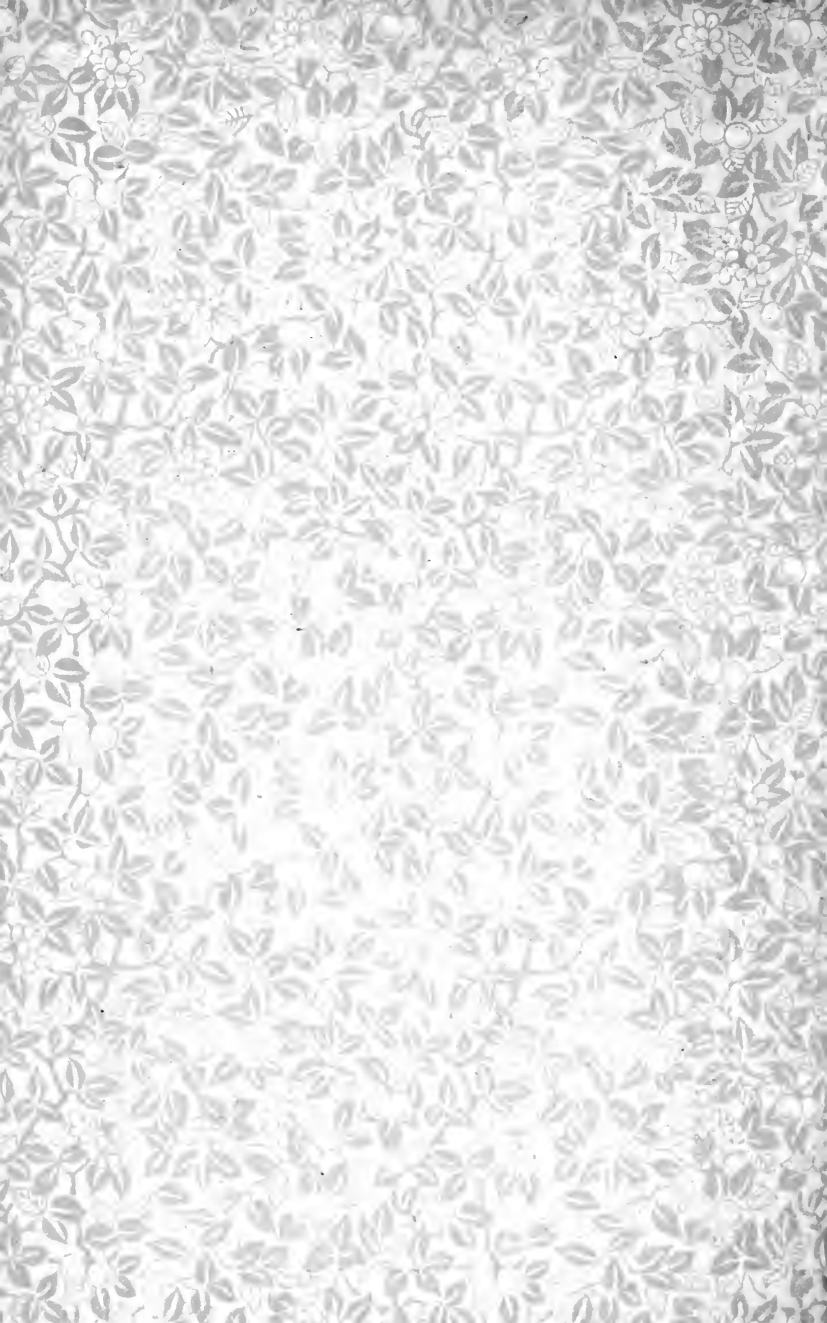
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